

SARAT CHANDRA : MAN AND ARTIST

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PREFACE

FIFTEEN years ago I wrote a book in Bengali on Sarat Chandra, and although in succeeding editions I have made additions here and there, I have made no fundamental change. I have felt during all these years that his novels may be viewed in a fresh perspective and appraised from a different point of view. The gentle insistence of my friends of the Saraswatya Library has made this new orientation possible, and the following pages are the result. In the present venture, I have tried to relate Sarat Chandra's work to his life and to judge his novels under three aspects—his delineation of rural society in general and of the Hindu joint family in particular, his portraiture of the deadly war of spirit and convention, of reason and impulse and his experiments in the field of the novel of discussion, in which his purpose is not so much to tell tales as to present problems. No one is more sensible than I of the many blemishes to be found in this book. I apologise particularly for the repetitions unavoidable in a work that surveys different novels from a common angle of vision or analyses the same novel to illustrate various aspects of the novelist's art. My only plea is that whenever I have repeated myself, the novelty of the context may justify the repetition. Then, again, as the present work is an introduction to Sarat Chandra's novels and does not aim at giving exhaustive criticism, my first care has been to see that I may not lose sight of the wood in the trees. I have, therefore, chosen for discussion only those stories and novels which I regard as significant, and in considering

these, too, I have confined myself to their more salient characteristics. Lovers of Sarat Chandra will miss reference to novels like *Shubhada* and *Shrikanta* Part Four and may object to my cursory treatment of *Pandit Mashai* and *Chandra Nath*. I must point out, further, that the transliteration of Bengali words does not follow any principle consistently; it is popular rather than scientific. For these and other errors and omissions I ask pardon of the generous reader.

I am indebted to Mr Narendra Dev from whose book on Sarat Chandra the biographical sketch given in Chapter Two has largely been taken. In this chapter I have mentioned names without an introductory "Mr" or "Late Mr", for it is my belief that this omission will make the narrative more smooth and racy. I must add that I have laid stress on the literary significance of facts and events rather than on minute accuracy or mere descriptive detail. The eminent critic twice referred to is my teacher Dr Srikumar Banerji of Presidency College, Calcutta, whose book on the history of Bengali fiction is a landmark in Bengali criticism. My thanks are due also to my friends Mr Tara Pada Mukherji, Mr Pavitra Kumar Basu and my former pupil Mr Saurindra Nath Roy, from whom I have received many useful suggestions. Mr Tara Pada Mukherji and Mr Sadananda Chakravarti, my former pupil and present colleague, have read over the manuscript and helped me with their comments on it. The Index I owe to the kind assistance of Mr Birendra Mohan Das Gupta.

The 14th July, 1945.

RAJSHAHI COLLEGE,
Bengal.

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SARAT CHANDRA

MAN AND ARTIST

CHAPTER I

RABINDRA NATH AND SARAT CHANDRA

RABINDRA NATH TAGORE AND SARAT CHANDRA Chatterji are the two greatest figures in Bengali literature during the twentieth century, and Sarat Chandra always looked upon himself as only a disciple of Rabindra Nath. Yet no two men could be more unlike. In appearance Sarat Chandra with his sallow complexion, medium height and undistinguished features presented a contrast to Rabindra Nath who was divinely tall and divinely fair. In conversation with Rabindra Nath one would be impressed by the majestic appearance, the profound gaze of the eyes and the rich golden voice, whereas the most distinctive things about Sarat Chandra were only a merry twinkle in the eye and a piercing quality in the voice. Rabindra Nath, the grandson of Prince Dwarka Nath Tagore, was born and reared amidst the gorgeous surroundings of a palatial home. Although none in his family has been so much distinguished as he, yet Rabindra Nath inherited not only

wealth but culture from his forbears, for it is a common saying that the goddesses of Wealth and Learning—Lakshmi and Saraswati—ordinarily so inimical to each other, for once forgot their traditional rivalry and jointly presided over the Tagore family. Sarat Chandra was born poor, very poor, in a far away village in which it was not safe to stir out after dusk. It is true that his father was in some respects a very remarkable man, but it cannot be said that Sarat Chandra had anything like Rabindra Nath's rich heritage in culture. Much of Rabindra Nath's youthful poetry was written during his stay in his ancestral estates in the district of Rajshahi, and later on he settled in the village of Santiniketan, devoting himself to the work of rural reconstruction, but in spite of his constant contact with rural life, there was something urban, almost metropolitan, about him. Sarat Chandra was always of the village, a lover of rural life, who seemed to fly away from urban contacts. Although during his later years he built a house in the suburbs of Calcutta, he would often go back to his village home and his presence in the metropolis was scarcely marked, none except a very limited circle being aware of his movements. None can accuse the poet of any love for cheap popularity or publicity, but he was always before the public eye, addressing meetings, conducting musical soirees or dramatic performances and taking part in controversies. There were visitors from all parts of the world daily flocking to his residence which became a place of pilgrimage. Although Sarat Chandra became immensely popular almost from the day of his advent as a writer, he retained to the last a shyness about publicity. His first published story *Mandir* (*The Temple*) was printed

in another man's name, and when his *Baradidi* was being serialised in *Bharati*, the author's name was not given out until at the end. He would seldom consent to appear in meetings; if a promise was extracted by insistent friends and admirers, he would, more often than not, break the engagement and make the organisers wait for him in vain. If a laudatory article about his work was shown to him, he would be pleased but would be obviously nervous. Rabindra Nath's life has been told by himself, and there is little in it which was not known to the public from the time they were curious about it, the details of his life no less than his works being a part of our national asset. But Sarat Chandra, although simple, hospitable and courteous, seemed to be a man of mystery. Little but the main outlines of his biography were known to the public during his lifetime, and the outlines were far from clear. And now, in spite of the publication of some sort of an authorised biography, many facts seem to be still unknown. It is curious that we know most of the finite details in the life of the poet of the Infinite, but most of the facts about the novelist, who was hailed as a realist, should be hidden from us.

The literary careers of the two men present another contrast. Rabindra Nath was born with a *golden* spoon in his mouth, but he had to create his public and wait for years before he could earn fame. Sarat Chandra passed through many lean years as a man but none as a writer; he who saw so much struggle in life had to face no struggle in letters. To the last day there were critics who cried him down as a purveyor of delightful obscenity, but he became popular from the day he was known as a writer. It

may almost be said that a poor clerk in Burma woke one day and found himself famous. Then, again, their attitudes to contemporary events and to literature were strikingly different. Rabindra Nath respected Mahatmaji, but kept aloof from the Congress and the Non-Co-operation movement and was loud in his condemnation of violent revolutionary activity. Sarat Chandra criticised Mahatmaji but joined the Congress movement, becoming the President of the Howrah District Congress Committee, and although he does not seem to have approved of terrorism and through the lips of Bharati (*Pather Dabi*) gave imperishable expression to his dislike of the ideology of violence, yet he had nothing but admiration for the terrorist's burning patriotism and his unflinching courage. Rabindra Nath is a poet of eternal verities, and even though in some of his poems he pictures life as a ceaseless force, his genius was inspired by an appreciation of truths, that wake to perish never, of Eternal Passion, Eternal Pain. He knew that there is a bond of connexion between Past and Present and between Present and Future and that when in the centuries to come a female reader appreciates beauty or responds to poetry, she should realise that generations ago, he sang of the beauty of nature and of life. (Sarat Chandra had no such assurance; he wrote of dynamic problems rather than of static truths. For him life is a quest that has no end; with revolution in time, the quest also changes, and there is a transvaluation of values. When his countrymen felicitated him at a public meeting on the fiftythird anniversary of his birthday, he was deeply touched by the ovation but reminded his audience that nothing lasts in the world of literature and that he looked forward

to the day when his own works would be so dated as to deserve to be thrown into the waste paper basket! Sarat Chandra generally avoided public discussions and controversies; but twice he took part in them, and on both these occasions he ranged himself on the side opposed to Tagore's. In the Non-Co-operation days Rabindra Nath addressed a meeting on co-operation in the field of education (*Shikshar Milan*), stressing the need for assimilating western culture. Sarat Chandra came out with a rejoinder on the conflict in education (*Shikshar Virodh*), showing that the modern system of education is inimical to Indian nationalism. The other occasion is even more significant. Rabindra Nath believed that literature and art transcend the limitations of time and place and soar above the finite realities of the workaday world. This led him to launch an attack on modern literature with its propagandist zeal and its emphasis on the squalor of everyday reality. Sarat Chandra riddled Rabindra Nath's essay with sarcastic and ironical comments and made out a plea not certainly for obscurity but for the new note in modern literature. Although there is a good deal of critical discussion in Rabindra Nath's *Gora* and *Ghare Boire* (*The Home and the World*), the poet did not look with favour on modern problem dramas and problem novels. In a sense most of Sarat Chandra's novels are problem novels. In his later works like *Pather Dabi* (*The Right of the Road*), *Shesh Prashna* (*The Ultimate Question*), discussion becomes more important than plot, and in his essays Sarat Chandra becomes the champion of those modern novels and dramas in which all other interests are swamped by argument. It has been seen that the two men differed as widely in their ideals and outlook as

in appearance. Yet strangely enough, Sarat Chandra, otherwise an iconoclast, proclaimed himself a disciple of Rabindra Nath Tagore. When, on the occasion of *Rabindra-Jayanti*, the celebration of Rabindra Nath's seventieth birthday, he drafted the address on behalf of his countrymen and said in language possessed of unsurpassable sweetness in diction and rhythm that in Rabindra Nath's work they have seen fully realised their own ideals of beauty and truth, he was expressing sentiment that was true of almost all his countrymen but it was most emphatically true of himself. What is the significance in literature of this follower of Rabindra Nath who struck a new path for himself and whom millions of readers not only admired as a wizard of words but also loved as a man, who seemed to be very near to them, who knew of their hopes and fears and wrote of their joys and sorrows with an intimacy and sympathy never before found in prose or poetry?

CHAPTER II

BHAGALPUR—RANGOON—CALCUTTA

SARAT CHANDRA was born on the 15th September, 1876 in the small village of Debanandapur in the district of Hooghly. Otherwise undistinguished, this village was the nursery of another great literary figure, poet Bharat Chandra (d. 1760), who spent his youth here. From his mother Bhubaneshwari Debi Sarat Chandra inherited a tender heart that felt not only for men and women but also for beasts and birds. Sarat Chandra had many pets; even when he had become a celebrated writer, his favourite companion was an ugly dog Bheli whom he had gathered from the streets. Bheli's death touched him as deeply as might the death of a near relation. It may also be pointed out that his greatest short story, written with a force and irony reminiscent of Maupassant, is about a peasant's love for his bull Mahesh. Sarat Chandra's father Matilal Chatterji was in many ways a striking personality and he seems to have deeply influenced the character of the novelist who was second amongst his nine children. Matilal had learning, a gift for writing and a proficiency in arts and crafts. But he appears to have been something of a crank and a ne'er-do-well. He would scarcely ever do anything useful, and even if he was harnessed into a job, he would soon slip away. Sarat Chandra said that he inherited from his father a restless spirit which made him a tireless rover, and a keen literary taste. But he must have inherited something more fundamental.

In his surroundings the father was looked upon with pity and contempt, as a man who could not make his way up. But Sarat Chandra knew that this man, who was outwardly a failure, who could not even finish his manuscripts, was in spirit greater than the successful men about him. This must have made him realise, as nothing else could have done, the vulgarity which often accompanies success and the nobility which is sometimes inseparably connected with failure. Not only had he a soft corner in his heart for vagabonds and waifs, but most of his heroes are men outwardly unsuccessful. Either they have stepped beyond the limits of conventional morality—there is no evidence that Matilal did so—or they are restless vagrants and cranks who have strayed from the high road that leads to success. It is more than probable that the father's example gave Sarat Chandra an idea of true human values; he learnt the great truth that men are very seldom what they seem to be.

Matilal must have influenced his son in another manner, too. Matilal was poor, and what is worse, he was indifferent to wealth. That was a characteristic not only of the father who lived and died in poverty but of the son who had at one time faced dire distress but later rose to great affluence, owning houses and a motor car. Those who saw Sarat Chandra in his palmy days testify to his carelessness about wealth. What appealed to him in Deshabandhu Chitta Ranjan Das is not his munificence or the ease with which he spent his money but the inner indifference to lucre which makes a man squander wealth because wealth has little intrinsic value for him. "People tell me," said he, "we have never seen such philanthropy,

such self-sacrifice. You can receive a gift with the hand, you can see sacrifice with your eye; these are visible, tangible things which seldom escape notice. But what of the spirit of renunciation that lies hidden in the soul? Indeed, I have never seen another such *Sannyasi*, although he was immersed in multifarious worldly activities. He had no need for wealth, he could never realise the value of material splendour; who but such a man would squander wealth with both hands?" The tribute is striking not only because it is worthy of the man to whom it was paid but also because it is characteristic of the author who paid it. This feature in Sarat Chandra's character which may be traced to his father is reflected also in his creations. Many of his heroes and heroines possess wealth, but all of them, whether it is Suresh (*Grihadaha*) or Rajlakshmi (*Shrikanta*) seem to be careless about riches.

Matilal's poverty may be said to have influenced Sarat Chandra's art in yet another way. Poverty is unnatural; it is a curse. But it makes a man acquainted with life in the lower strata of society and the gallery of his portraits has a larger variety than that of any other novelist in Bengal. It is not the variety of his portraits which alone is remarkable. Although he can rightly be accused of occasional lapses into sentimentalism, most of his portraits of low life have a hardness and severity not found elsewhere. With striking economy he recreates the squalid details in a poor man's life as he recaptures, too, the embittered agony with which the underdog faces his suffering.

Sarat Chandra had his early schooling in a *Pathshala* at Debanandapur. At Debanandapur he met two persons who seem to have left a permanent

impress on his memory. One was a self-willed girl, his playmate at the *Pathshala*, who loved him very much and was an obedient comrade in his boyish pranks, and it is not unlikely that it is this girl who reappears, transformed by an artist's imagination, as his most famous heroine Rajlakshmi. Another figure is Nayan Sardar, a low caste hero who rescued him when one night he was attacked by dacoits. It is not unreasonable to assume that this Sardar, with his *lathi*, is the original of Akbar Sardar in *Pallisamaj* (*Rural Society*) or of Sagar Sardar in *Dena-Paona* (*Debit and Credit*). Quite early in his life he had to move in the company of his parents to Bhagalpur where the family of his maternal grandfather had settled, and it is at Bhagalpur that Sarat Chandra's boyhood and youth were, except for a short interregnum at Debanandapur again, passed. At Bhagalpur Sarat Chandra with his parents and brothers and sisters lived, more or less under the protection of the Ganguly family. Sarat Chandra's maternal grandfather Kedarnath Ganguly was an influential man in the Bengali community at Bhagalpur. Kedarnath had four brothers, and they formed a large Hindu joint family. Prolonged residence in contact with a large joint family was not without its influence on Sarat Chandra's art. The Hindu joint family in which brothers and cousins share a common mess and move together as a single unit is, indeed, a unique social institution. The main principle that a member should subordinate his personal interests to those of the family is subject to much shifting and balancing, because in a capitalist society communisation can at best be imperfect. The joint family contains many members who try to exploit and some who are ex-

exploited, and their conflicting characters create innumerable complexities in a family in which the man who earns has, theoretically, the same right as the man who merely consumes. Even if we leave the financial aspect out of consideration, the joint family is an amalgam of men, women and children of varying temperaments, who share the same room, and not unoften, the same bed. Everywhere the idea is that the family, and not the individual, is the unit. In such an arrangement peace and harmony can be secured only by a nice adjustment; the equilibrium, which is often at the point of being disturbed, is maintained through a proper levelling of angularities. It is obvious that such an organisation tends to retard the development of individual personality, but it is only individual tolerance and individual magnanimity that can make the system work. In the Ganguly family at Bhagalpur, where five brothers lived together and where there were dissensions and compromises, Sarat Chandra saw the huge Hindu joint family at work, and he became the first great novelist of Hindu joint family life with its intricate relationships, its complex arrangements and its inexplicable harmony.

Another thing in Bhagalpur society had a deep influence on Sarat Chandra's character. The Ganguly family was extremely conservative, and Sarat Chandra was by temperament an enemy of conservatism. At that time at Bhagalpur there were two rival parties, one the conservative group led by the Ganguly family and the other the liberal group of which the central figure was one Shib Chandra Banerji who broke away from the hide-bound conservatism of Hindu society and had even crossed the seas and gone to

England. He was a farsighted liberal who was in the van of all progressive movements in the society of Bhagalpur. Besides this, he was a champion of youthful sports and pastimes, and his house was the rendezvous of an amateur theatrical party. Sarat Chandra was a near relation of the Ganguly family, but his heart was with the liberals headed by Banerji, and it may, indeed, be reasonably assumed that his rebellion against the cramping limitations of the traditional religion was fostered by his contact with this gentleman who is probably the original of the Doctor Babu in the first part of *Shrikanta*. The opposition between the two rival parties reached a climax when, on the occasion of a festivity in the house of his maternal uncles, the guests refused to partake of the dishes if Sarat Chandra served them; the result was that he was ostracised by his uncles; in deep disgust he left Bhagalpur and was not heard of for some time.

In boyhood and youth Sarat Chandra was remarkable for more reasons than one. Both at Debanandapur and at Bhagalpur he evinced a deep passion for study and gave great promise as a pupil. But he was far from being a book-worm. His tastes were versatile and his habits far from regular. He was both a truant and a tramp. He was a good athlete and loved all kinds of physical exercise. He was fascinated by the mysteries of snake-charming; another absorbing hobby even as a boy was fishing, and there are stories of his going out on excursions by boat both for the sake of catching fish and with no aim at all. We may remember in this connexion the vivid descriptions of such excursions in the first part of *Shrikanta*. He was the leader of a gang of daring young men who would poach on the pro-

perties of their neighbours and play all sorts of wild pranks. At Bhagalpur he had for some time a boon companion in one Raju or Rajendra Nath who, it is said, was the original of Indranath in *Shrikanta* Part One. Sarat Chandra had taste for music and a sweet voice; he was also an accomplished painter. As an amateur actor, he earned popularity at Bhagalpur, appearing mostly in female roles. The members of the theatrical party were a merry gang, fond of tea and tobacco and not averse to stronger stimulants. Sarat Chandra read at school and college, took part in humanitarian activities as well as in musical soirees and in amateur theatricals. But the most distinctive thing about his early career was that he often slipped away unnoticed, remaining absent for days and even months. He would go out, nobody knew where, sometimes in the company of Raju, but mostly alone. As a lonely, penniless tramp, he acquired first-hand experience of life in all its multifarious aspects in the lower spheres of Indian society. In course of these wanderings he at one time became a *Sannyasi* and saw many specimens of *Sadhus*—true and false. The *Sadhu* in *Shrikanta* Part I is drawn with unconcealed contempt whereas Swami Vajrananda in Part III is an idealised portrait of the *Sannyasi* who has renounced the world only that he may realise it the more fully. It may be mentioned in passing that his younger brother Prabhash Chandra joined the Ramkrishna Mission and became a *Sannyasi*, assuming the name of Swami Vedananda. Who knows if in drawing the character of Vajrananda, he was not inspired by the ideals and example of his younger brother?

From what has been said above, it is clear that as a young man, Sarat Chandra possessed certain

remarkable traits of character and rich human sensibility, but he was far from what, judging by copybook maxims, one would call a "good" boy. This distinctiveness is reflected in his art, too. Being himself very much out of the ordinary, and guided possibly by his father's example, he seems to have judged men and women by an original standard. Indeed, Sarat Chandra seems to suggest that conventional morality tends to narrow a man's outlook; a man is not great or good if he merely conforms to accepted standards, but he is truly heroic if he has a broad outlook and a sensitive heart. One of Sarat Chandra's novels is called *Charitraheen*, the title which means *The Characterless* being itself a challenge. The novel portrays two men Upendra and Satish, who, though close friends, are as poles asunder. Upendra is a brilliant product of the University; Satish left school before he could pass even the Matriculation Examination. Upendra is rigidly orthodox, even puritanical in his opinions, and unblemished in conduct; Satish was a drunkard and in love with one who is supposed to be a fallen woman whom he meets as a maidservant in a mess. But the moral of the story is that Satish has a larger heart than Upendra who is made wiser by experience and learns to shed his puritanical narrowness. This bias in favour of the unworldly and the unconventional is the product as much of his temperament as of his early experiences.

Sarat Chandra passed the Entrance Examination from the T. N. J. School, Bhagalpur in 1894 and read up to F.A. in the T. N. J. College, but he could not appear at the F.A. Examination as he could not procure his Examination fees. It was about this time (1895) that his mother died and his father started a

separate establishment at Khanjarpur in the town of Bhagalpur. In order to help his father in his distress, Sarat Chandra accepted a job in Raj Banaili Estate, Bihar, but he could not endure the shackles of service for more than a short period and soon quit-
 ted his job. Just after this his father had occasion to chastise him rather sharply over a very trivial matter, and Sarat Chandra left home in the garb of a *Sannyasi*, partly in a huff but largely in obedience to that restless spirit which he had inherited from his father. Reference has already been made to these wanderings in the guise of a *Sannyasi* and their probable effect on his art. It may be mentioned here that in course of his travels he happened to go to Muzaffarpur where the young *Sannyasi* made a striking impression on the Bengali community by his sweet songs and pleasant manners. Of the warm-hearted gentlemen he met here, one was Pramatha Nath Bhattacharyya who was a life-long friend and will reappear in this narrative; another was a Zemindar Mahadev Sahu, who may have been the original of the Kumar Sahib in *Shrikanta* Part One, and the third was Shikhar Nath Banerji, husband of the well-known Bengali novelist Arunupa Debi. It was at this time that he got the news of his father's death (1903), and he hurried in a cycle from Muzaffarpur to Bhagalpur. He was penniless, and thanks to the hostility of the Ganguly family he could not secure any financial help for the performance of his father's last rites. He sold his cycle for only Rupees eighty, performed the *Sraddha* ceremony of his father and tried to make some arrangement for his younger brothers and sister. He came down to Calcutta to secure a job but in vain. After vegetating for some

time in Calcutta where he failed to secure a job, he started for Rangoon, a penniless vagrant, and a new chapter in his career began. When he started for Burma, he had scraped little more than his passage money, and when he reached Rangoon he had only rupees two in his pockets!

When Sarat Chandra left for Burma in 1903, he was a pronounced failure both to himself and to others. He was now twentyseven years old, but what evidences had he given of his literary genius? Strangely enough, although he was penniless and unknown and seemed to have had no idea of his own abilities, such evidences were very marked, indeed. He began to write when he was barely eighteen; his first work seems to have been a novel—*Basha*—of which he destroyed the manuscript. Another early novel that never saw the light of day was *Abhiman*, which was written in imitation of Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne*; he is said also to have translated Marie Corelli's *The Mighty Atom*, but these manuscripts have not been preserved. When he lived with his parents in the house of his maternal grandfather, the young members of the family started a manuscript magazine named *Shishu* (*Child*), a few issues of which were brought out. At Khanjarpur where he and his family had removed after the death of his mother, Sarat Chandra came in touch with two promising writers, Bibhuti Bhushan Bhatta and his sister Nirupama Debi. These three along with other friends established some sort of a literary club and began to contribute to a manuscript magazine called *Alo* (*Light*) which, after the first issue, was, on the death of its founder Satish Babu, re-christened *Chhaya* (*Shadow*) and brought out in Calcutta. It was to this

manuscript journal published by his friends and not meant for public consumption that Sarat Chandra contributed many of his early scribblings. These include short stories like *Kashinath*, *Bojha* (*The Burden*), *Anupamar Prem* (*Anupama's Love*), long stories such as *Debadas*, *Baradidi* and *Chandra Nath*. Some of his early writings have been lost, but most of them were printed and published, first in magazines and then as books. But when his writings were first printed, it was many years after he had left for Burma and to all intents and purposes he had forgotten them. These writings, although not free from blemishes, are extraordinarily well-written. They do not betray anywhere traces of apprenticeship, and indeed, when *Baradidi* was being serialised in *Bharati*, where it was recommended by his early friends, and where it was printed anonymously for some time, people suspected Rabindra Nath Tagore to be the author.

The reader is naturally curious to know why he had not tried to publish his writings himself. He was in dire straits but never thought of using his manuscripts to advance his fortunes. Although literature as a whole-time profession might have appeared to be too utopian to a struggling young man fifty years ago, yet his indifference towards his manuscripts is, indeed, very striking, but it is very characteristic of the man who, at the height of his fame, proclaimed his belief that all literature, good and bad, is as perishable as any other commodity. One reason why he did not set store by his manuscripts was an ingrained shyness of publicity which was a marked trait of his character, haunting him till the last day. It was deeper than mere modesty or diffidence, for he

could not overcome this shyness even when he was hailed as the Unconquerable Story-teller. In one of the innumerable memorial meetings held immediately on his death, one of his Bhagalpur comrades referred to a significant occasion when, in course of his leave, he was introduced to the celebrated critic and journalist Suresh Chandra Samajpati who had taken interest in some of his stories. Although a severe judge of literature, Samajpati commended Sarat Chandra's writings and prophesied that he would be great one day. This appreciation deeply moved him, but he was nervous and agitated, and as he came home in the rainy evening, he trembled with excitement. This experience was a landmark in his life, for although it was some time before he had finally settled down as a writer, it made a deep impression on his sensitive soul. Another remarkable feature of his character was a certain fastidiousness that made him set a lofty ideal before himself which he would be always striving after and never achieve. It is this fastidiousness which made even his early efforts such finished masterpieces; it is because he would think and think and aim at a high level of craftsmanship that *Baradidi* and *Debadas* seem to have sprung full-armed like Minerva out of his brain.

II

An uncle of Sarat Chandra, Aghore Babu by name, was a successful lawyer at Rangoon and wanted to bring Sarat Chandra over to Burma as soon as the latter had passed the Entrance Examination. As the conservative Ganguly family was opposed to sea-

voyage, the offer could not then be accepted. But in 1903 when Sarat Chandra was rotting in Calcutta without any prospects before him, he thought of the uncle and crossed over to Rangoon, penniless and unknown. The uncle, who was not only celebrated but seemed to be in affluence, received the poor relation with warm hospitality, but before this benevolent man had set Sarat Chandra on his feet, he died, leaving heavy debts. Sarat Chandra was again in the streets, a poor vagabond. After doing all that he could for the wife of the deceased benefactor, Sarat Chandra roamed about widely in Burma, sometimes in the garb of a Buddhist monk, but always in search of a job. When he had almost given up the chase in despair, he was helped by his proficiency in music which attracted M. K. Mittra, then Deputy Examiner of Accounts, who began to take interest in the penniless waif possessing a sweet voice. The acquaintance ripened into friendship, and Mittra found in this tramp not only an enchanting singer but also an accomplished scholar haunted by the love for books. Mittra got him a clerk's job in his own office and gave him shelter in his own house where Sarat Chandra studied philosophy and sociology with avidity. He had after all got a foothold in life. During his early years in Burma, the Bengali community there did not get any inkling of his literary abilities, but they were charmed by his songs. Of several occasions one may be mentioned as showing the future novelist in a characteristic mood. There was a reception in honour of the Bengali poet Nabin Chandra Sen at Rangoon, and Sarat Chandra sang the opening song which was highly appreciated. The distinguished guest, deeply moved, wanted to see the singer whom he called

Rangoon Ralna or Ornament of Rangoon. But the singer, ever shy of publicity and praise, had left as soon as his part had been done.

Sarat Chandra was staying with M. K. Mitra when plague broke out suddenly at Rangoon, for which Mitra was forced to remove to a small house in the suburbs, and Sarat Chandra shifted to a mess which accommodated clerks. Here he made many friends some of whom were irregular in their habits, and it is said that Sarat Chandra himself began to live a fast life. Experiences in a mess at Rangoon were not, however, without their effect on Sarat Chandra's art. Indeed, two factors seemed to have a determining influence on Sarat Chandra the man and the artist—his experience of joint family life at Bhagalpur and of mess life at Rangoon. A mess is in many ways a foil to a joint family. In a joint family all the members are supposed to be inspired by the same ideal of the family before the individual and are governed by a common discipline. In actual practice the ideal is often lost sight of, but the discipline is always there. It is a complex organism with delicate, often invisible filaments, and harmony is secured by means of a nice equipoise of incompatibilities. A mess means a combination of individuals who live together in the same establishment as separate units with varying degrees of intimacy between one member and another. Living in a ramshackle joint family at Bhagalpur, Sarat Chandra saw men, women and children in their relations with others; he observed the interaction between the meannesses that undermine a joint family and the undercurrents of tolerance and generosity which, under shifting garbs, sustain it. In a mess at Rangoon, he observed humanity in a



different perspective. Here, if any where, was God's plenty—the generous libertine and the narrow puritan, the careless spendthrift and the contemptible miser, the treacherous husband and the self-effacing friend. Here personality is not cramped by a rigid discipline, but neither is it sharpened by the compelling necessity for adjustment. Intimate acquaintance with a joint family made Sarat Chandra's natural power of observation keener, but his experiences of Rangoon messes made his horizon wider. This difference is noticed if a comparison is made between early stories like *Debadas* and *Baradidi* and later novels like *Shrikanta* and *Pather Dabi* (*The Right of the Road*).

The sojourn in Burma was fruitful from yet another point of view. Whatever may the reason be, Sarat Chandra was very early impressed by a sense of the heartlessness of religion and the relentless rigour of Hindu society. Here in Burma he saw that the strict discipline of Hinduism was at a discount; caste was more honoured in the breach than the observance, and men and women, who were not married in accordance with *Shastric* rites or who might not have been married at all, were living openly together without social stigma or personal degradation. These examples must have set Sarat Chandra thinking hard on the significance of rigid social laws, on the ultimate spiritual sanction behind religious taboo, on the pragmatic value of traditional morality. Life in a joint family tends to narrow a man's perspective, and the Ganguly household was notoriously conservative. Contact with Shib Chandra Banerji had stimulated Sarat Chandra's liberality, and life in Burma confirmed him in his revolutionary questionings. It is

significant that his earliest stories, written when he had hardly crossed his teens, were about the sanctity of forbidden, inhibited love. But as a result of the larger contacts in Burma, his musings became deeper, his unorthodoxy more strident. One notices the change if one compares Baradidi and Parbati (*Debadas*) with Abhaya (*Shrikanta*) and Sumitra (*Pather Dabi*). It is difficult to say when and where exactly the different parts of *Charitraheen* were conceived and written, but it is easy to see that even if he could have portrayed a Sabitri at Bhagalpur or in Calcutta, he could not have created a Kiranmayee if he had not crossed over to Burma.

Some important biographical details have to be noted at this stage. At Rangoon he was once sharing a house with a mechanic, an old drunkard of a widower with a young daughter. Sarat Chandra married this girl, not so much out of a desire to marry as to rescue her from the clutches of a vicious old toper to whom the father owed money. It seems that Sarat Chandra was happy with his wife who bore him a son, but the happiness was shortlived, for the wife and the child soon died of plague. Although he had more or less permanently settled in Burma, like other Bengalis, he would often come back to Bengal on leave and renew old contacts. It was in course of one of these sojourns that he married a poor Brahmin lady Hiranmayee Debi who was to be his companion till the last day of his life. What is more significant from the point of view of literature is that once while he was in Calcutta, preparing for the return trip to Rangoon, the young boys in the house in which he was staying pressed him to write a short story for the *Kuntalin* competition. *Mandir (The Temple)* was the

result. The story was sent in the name of one of his maternal uncles Surendra Nath Ganguly and won the first prize. Sarat Chandra did not know what happened to the story; obviously he did not care. But it confirmed Saurindra Mukherji who, too, won a prize, and other friends in their confidence in Sarat Chandra's abilities. It must be remembered that it was these friends, notably Pramatha Bhattacharyya, Saurindra Mukherji and Phanindra Pal, who helped to make him known to the literary world. But for their efforts Sarat Chandra, ever diffident and shy, would have remained a poor clerk, unrecognised beyond the immediate circle of his intimate friends.

In Burma, Sarat Chandra was known to the wider public as an accomplished but eccentric singer whom it was difficult to prevail upon to sing. His intimate friends were further aware of his capacity as a painter, his love for books, his command of the *bon mot*, his fondness for *Batu Babu*, a pet bird, but never suspected the existence of the creative genius in the petty clerk. Once alone he was drawn into a discussion on womanhood and then persuaded to write an essay for a meeting of the literary section of the Bengal Social Club of which he was a member. On the appointed day, he got the essay ready but with characteristic shyness absented himself from the meeting. It was a lengthy essay on the history of woman, read by one of his friends, and the audience very much appreciated his wealth of learning and command of style. But that is all the evidence he gave of literary talent at Rangoon. It seems that he had written out a bulky volume on the history of woman, laying special stress on sexual relations, but the manuscript was destroyed by a fire.

It was at this time—about 1907—that old Calcutta friends, notably Saurindra Mukherji thought of a manuscript Sarat Chandra had left behind him several years ago and got it published as a serial story in a leading monthly magazine *Bharati*. This was *Baradidi* which became immensely popular, and until the name appeared at the conclusion of the serial, most people thought that Rabindra Nath was the author. After some years, the celebrated critic Suresh Chandra Samajpati lay his hands on some other manuscripts and stories like *Haricharan*, *Balyasmriti* (*Early Memories*) appeared in his *Sahitya* which was even more highbrow than *Bharati*. In the mean time Sarat Chandra had been to Calcutta, and Phanindra Pal, Editor of *Yamuna* requested him to write for his journal. Encouraged by the success of *Baradidi*, Sarat Chandra agreed, and from Rangoon, he sent the manuscript of *Ramer Sumati* which created a sensation as soon as it was published in *Yamuna*. The Bengali reading public now felt as an astronomer feels when “a new planet swims into his ken.” Many of his stories and an essay on woman appeared in *Yamuna*, and there was yet another event which was more significant for him and for Bengali literature, for from this time it is difficult to think of them separately. In 1913, Messrs Gurudas Chatterji & Sons brought out a monthly journal *Bharatbarsha* which was planned on an ambitious scale. Sarat Chandra’s old Muzaffarpur friend Pramatha Nath Bhattacharyya, who was connected with the organisers, established contacts between them and Sarat Chandra, and *Biraj Bow* appeared in one of its early issues. To the last day of Sarat Chandra’s life *Bharatbarsha* claimed him as one of its regular contributors.

Sarat Chandra's position as a writer was, in spite of adverse comment here and there, firmly established.

Sarat Chandra was in early life an athlete, but his health had very much deteriorated, thanks partly to his aimless wanderings, partly to occasional irregularities and partly to the constant strain of poverty. His friends urged him to throw up his job and adopt literature as a profession. Sarat Chandra, who had known so much of poverty in early life, hesitated to resign a job that brought him a regular income of about rupees one hundred a month. It was at this time that Messrs Gurudas Chatterji & Sons gave him a guarantee of financial assistance, and he burnt his boats in Burma and came to Calcutta, a novelist by profession.

III

Coming back to Bengal, Sarat Chandra did not settle down in the metropolis as many other persons in his position would have done. He lived for a long time in a rented house at Baje-Shibpur in the district of Howrah. Later on he removed to Samta Ber near Panitras (Hooghly), close to the village of his elder sister and brother-in-law, and here on the bank of the river Rupnarayan, he built for himself a beautiful house in which far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife, he lived in security and peace. There was a ceaseless flow of stories and novels from his pen, but his life was uneventful. The long struggle with poverty was over; he was back amongst his own people. He avoided the dust and glare of city life and mixed freely with the simple folk of his village, to whom

he was like a benevolent patriarch. Samta Ber was a few miles off from the nearest railway station Deolti, and although admirers would often go there to pay their homage, he was mostly undisturbed; the restless tramp had at last found a home in which he could live and work in tranquillity. He was, next to Rabindra Nath Tagore, easily the most distinguished writer in Bengal and in India, and his admirers began even to claim that his novels and short stories are better than Rabindra Nath's. He was as much unperturbed by fame which came to him, unsought and even unlooked for, as, in his early years, he had been undaunted by poverty. Praise was welcome to him, but whenever he found that it was running to excess, he would, with his irrepressible sense of humour, be the first to detect it and hasten to check the admirer. He would always refuse to be lionised. A few years before his death, he built, at the insistence of his wife, a house in Calcutta and bought a motor car, but his heart was always with his village cronies. He seemed to tire of the hurry and bustle of the metropolis where mechanised civilisation had robbed life of its leisure and beauty. Here emotions had to be restrained, angularities rounded off, and man loved his neighbour as his brother because he was equally indifferent to both. No wonder that this novelist, who had penetrated into the depths of human emotion as few other writers have done, who had recreated the life of Bengal not only with its squabbling and squalor but also with its infinite fund of humour and joy and nobility, should miss in a large city the sweetness and warmth which held him in thrall in the rural surroundings of Bengal.

The story of his later years is easily told. His

popularity was ever on the increase, and although there were always detractors who objected to his heresies about womanly fidelity, such murmurs of protest were drowned in the almost universal applause with which his writings were received. The Calcutta University awarded him the Jagattarini medal, and the Dacca University made him a Doctor of Literature *honoris causa*. Most of his novels have been staged or screened. Sishir Kumar Bhaduri's renderings of some of the important characters in his works deserve special mention, because here the Bengali public were delighted to find the unique combination of great literary genius and first-rate histrionic talent. But his health was broken beyond repair. After a prolonged and agonising illness, he died in a Nursing Home in Calcutta at the age of sixty-two, deeply mourned by his countrymen.

The above sketch of his life is obviously imperfect; after perusing all that has so far been recorded of him, we feel that much yet remains to be known. What, one may ask, was the man like? Friends testify to his large-heartedness, his sympathetic heart, his ever alert sense of humour. But this could be said of a hundred other men. We know of his zeal for the movement for Indian independence, his participation in Congress activities, his friendship for Deshabandhu C. R. Das. But here, too, he is one amongst thousands, and we know that although he was elected President of the Howrah District Congress Committee, he retired after a brief spell of work. His conversations recorded by an old friend of Burma days do not show much distinction. He seems to have been fond of popular novelists like Marie Corelli and Henry Wood, and amongst classics,

Dickens and Zola were his favourites. There is similarity between him and Dickens, because like Dickens, he had experience of grinding poverty; like Dickens, he drew pictures of children; like Dickens, he was interested in men and women in the lower strata of society, both of them excelling in comic portraits of people drawn from there; like Dickens, he seems to be recording in novels his own experiences, and like Dickens, he, too, had a strain of sentimentality. But although a humorist to the core, he could not create a Pickwick, and Dickens was never curious about forbidden love.

It is here that one feels most acutely the incompleteness of his biography in so far as it relates to his art. The one recurrent theme of his novels is love that is not sanctioned by convention; even when a heroine like Annada Didi (*Shrikanta*) or Sabita (*Shesher Parichaya*) is drawn to her husband, it is clear that such love is not the emotion a normal wife feels for her husband. He has created a gallery of portraits of remarkable women, but most of them have a shady past. Where, one wonders, did he get inspiration for such portraiture? Or are they creatures of pure fancy, airy nothings to which his imagination alone gave a local habitation and a name? He often said that his creations were drawn from his experiences: What were the experiences which went to the making of his heroines? We know that he had a girl playmate at the village *Pathshala* who was self-willed but was very much devoted to him. When this is said, how little is said of the matchless Raj-lakshmi in *Shrikanta*? He told the present writer that the most terrible incident recorded in *Grihadaha* (*The Wrecked Home*) is founded on fact; he did, in-

deed, know of a woman who was guilty of adultery in circumstances similar to Achala's. Who was this woman, what was her experience, how much of *Grihadaha* is fact and how much of it fiction? Even if we leave detailed similarities out of consideration, we may ask what made him the analyst of feminine love of a particular type, what experience made him delineate the conflict between primal instincts and a religious code imposed from without, what attracted him to the labyrinthine movements of a woman's heart? We hear of one Basak Babu, who deserted his Bengali wife and lived with Burmese women in a filthy hovel; even if we assume that he was the original for Abhaya's husband, the more fundamental question remains: Who inspired Sarat Chandra in the portraiture of Abhaya herself? Rash Bihari Bose or Jadu Gopal Mukherji might have been the original for Sabyasachi in *Pather Dabi*, but when did he meet a woman like Sumitra? Such questionings may and should be set down as springing from prurient curiosity about the secrets of an author's life; we have possibly no right to go beyond the finished product of art and pry into the mystery surrounding the artist's models. But these questions alone have significance for the reader or the critic who wants to connect an artist's life with his work, and it is a tribute to the enthralling quality of Sarat Chandra's art that such questions, which should, from the point of view of decorum, never be raised and which possibly can no longer be satisfactorily answered, always occur to the reader's mind. We understand his innate puritanism, we appreciate his questioning of accepted values, but where with his marvellous power of observation, did he see the

bewitching women who have a strong will, often a powerful intellect, almost always an extraordinarily sensitive heart, whose emotions carry on an unremitting struggle with their devotion to morality and religion? Did such women, if they ever existed at all, mean anything to him personally or did he contemplate them with an artist's sympathy but also with an artist's detachment? Who knows !

CHAPTER III

STORIES—SHORT AND LONG

I

THE short story is, in some respects, like the lyric poem. It is short and is concentrated on a single emotion or a single situation. It has no room for detailed analysis or looseness of structure. There is a certain tautness about it; either it throws a sudden flash of light on a hidden trait of character or it records a certain unexpected turn in the tide of events—and then it comes to a close. Its climax is reached too quickly, and its climax is its dénouement. It does not portray any one character in all its aspects, neither does it delineate the conflict of characters or the clashing of interests. Many of the best stories of Sarat Chandra are about the affections and animosities to be found in a Hindu joint family. That is why these short stories are not always short, for they contain a multiplicity of characters and a large variety of incidents. These stories belong to a new *genre* which reflects a peculiarity of Indian life, the complexity and confusion which may be produced by people with opposed interests and incompatible temperaments forming a single social unit. But they have the neatness and the compactness which characterise short stories, because in everyone of them Sarat Chandra is anxious to portray only that aspect of character which is relevant to his immediate theme; although there are diverse incidents, these are

selected with a wise economy, all details being subordinated to one aim, the revelation of character under the impact of the joint family.

Take, for example, *Ramer Sumati* (*Ram Turns A Good Boy*), one of his earliest and best stories. It is a short story covering fortyfive pages and having three well-marked sections. As is well-known, in a joint family not only fathers and sons but also brothers and cousins live in the same household and board at a common mess. The brothers have grown up in the same house, but every man has his own temperamental peculiarity, his own axe to grind. This leads to confusion and complexity which are further accentuated by differences in the temperaments of their wives who are all recruited from the outside. In this particular story, we find that although the household is not large, there is scope for a clashing of wills. Shyamlal and Ramlal are not brothers, but only step-brothers. Shyamlal has a wife, but Ram is only thirteen and an orphan, having lost his mother when he was barely two years and a half. There is Shyamlal's mother-in-law Digambari who knows very keenly that Ram's interests are not her daughter's, and she is eager to effect a separation between her son-in-law and the poor urchin. Ram is a wild, ungovernable truant who is always intent on some childish prank. He easily puts himself in the wrong, and the mother-in-law Digambari, who is the villain of the piece, is anxious to drive a wedge between the step-brothers so that the boy may be sent away. The only difficulty is with Narayani, the sister-in-law who was married when she was thirteen and has brought up Ram as her own child. She understands the villainy of her mother, the weak indifference of her husband

and is constantly embarrassed by the pranks of Ram who will obey none but herself and who is always getting into a scrape. Digambari succeeds in effecting a partition between the brothers, but Narayani cannot stand it for more than three days. She takes Ram back into her arms and quietly but firmly proposes to send her mother away. Ram, however, says that this is unnecessary, because he will henceforth be a good boy.

The story is told with great power and charm. In such stories, the emphasis is always on the revelation of the inner qualities in the hero and the heroine, which sustain and sweeten the joint family. The villain is not within the magic circle and is, therefore, portrayed from the outside. The villain is propelled by motives acting mechanically from without rather than by impulses springing spontaneously from within. The villain's character, although vividly delineated, does not show the author's real power or originality. Digambari is like a score of other characters in other stories of Sarat Chandra--Rashmani (*Bamuner Meye*), Jaylal (*Baikunther Will*) or Beni Ghoshal (*Palli Samaj*). The author's creative genius is revealed in the portraiture of the heroine Narayani who acts against her own interests and is opposed by her own people who is urged by an instinct that is deeper than conventional affiliations. The forces are all arrayed against Ram—he is an orphan, his guardian is only a step-brother, he is young and wild, he is in the toils of a woman who is remorselessly selfish. But deeper than all these adverse circumstances is the affection of his sister-in-law who, more than a mother, has completely identified herself with him. The technical craftsmanship display-

ed in the narration is in keeping with the originality of conception. In the first half of the story we find that Ram, restless and uncontrollable, is constantly creating difficulties, but these are smoothed over by the deep affection he and his sister-in-law feel for each other. In the second part, with the advent of Digambari matters swiftly come to a crisis, and there is complete alienation between the two brothers. The house is divided by a partition, and Ram in his half of the house is left to shift for himself. Narayani, battered on all sides, is at the breaking point and has no choice but to accept the heartless arrangement. But affection soon triumphs over a young boy's truancy and an old woman's wiles; the novelist loads the scales heavily against Narayani only to show how ineffective selfishness is when weighed against the dictates of the heart.

Mamlar Phal (Effects of Litigation) is a variation on the same theme—the interaction in a joint family between the claims of self-interest and the affections of the heart. Shibu and Shambhu are two brothers who lived for a long time in a joint family but have now separated. Their patrimony has been carefully partitioned except for a bamboo grove which each brother claims as his own and which is the subject of daily quarrel between the families. The brothers are poor, uneducated peasants who exchange high words and are often at the point of coming to blows. An additional complication is introduced by Gayaram, a wild urchin, Shambu's son by his first wife, who has been brought up by Shibu's wife Gangamani. Gayaram, who is disliked by his step-mother, belongs officially to Shambhu but lives oftener with his aunt and uncle than with his father. One day when the

quarrel between the brothers over a few bamboo leaves has reached a crisis, Gaya comes to his aunt for food, and although Gangamani, who loves the boy, does her best to please him, Gayaram, in a fit of childish anger, breaks her utensils and even beats her. The fat is in the fire; Shibu, exasperated beyond all limits, institutes a suit against Shambhu and his son. In instituting this suit he is egged on by his wife and ably assisted by his brother-in-law Panchu who is the villain of the story. Gayaram absconds. Gangamani goaded her husband to avenge the insults she had received from Shambhu and Gayaram, but her affection for the boy whom she has brought up as a mother proves stronger than her desire for revenge with the result that she soon loses all enthusiasm for the litigation she herself started. She mopes and mopes and then one day leaves her house without letting any body know of it. Panchu has had a warrant issued for the arrest of Gayaram and gathers information about his whereabouts. When Shibu and Panchu surprise the accused in his hovel, they have a greater surprise in store for themselves. Shibu finds that his missing wife is there, looking after Gayaram; the maternal instinct has triumphed over all strifes and disputes.

This story, which is much shorter than *Ramer Sumati*, gives us a beautiful glimpse of joint family life and shows how it is preserved in spite of the subversive forces which oppose it. The artistic skill in this story lies in the way in which the plot comes to its climax, throwing a flood of light on the character of Gangamani. In the family dispute she plays her part with vigour; she insists on Gayaram and his father being adequately punished, and Gayaram's

step-mother, too, wants the boy to be sent to jail. Gayaram is doomed, but he has an untapped source of strength in the very citadel of his enemy's camp. The stronger the barrier which affection encounters, the greater the force with which it asserts itself. The manner in which the feeling of affection is awakened in the midst of unfavourable circumstances and against the dictates of selfishness is a tribute to the spontaneous energy of human instincts and gives, too, an idea of the mysterious workings of the human heart.

Baikunther. Will (*Baikuntha's Will*) is a long story on the same theme—how the benevolent instinct of love triumphs over self-interest. Bhabani, who has brought up her step-son Gokul along with her son Binod Lal, has never made any distinction between them. Gokul, something of a simpleton but essentially sound at heart, is deeply attached both to his step-mother and his step-brother. As Binod falls into evil ways, Baikuntha, at the suggestion of his wife, makes a will, disinheriting Binod, because they fear that if he gets a share of the property, he will squander it. Gokul very much dislikes the arrangement but accepts it and performs many antics in his foolish enthusiasm for his brother. Complications now arise, thanks chiefly to the intrigues of his wife and her father and Gokul's own follies and idiosyncrasies. Gokul is swayed this way and that, and Bhabani, who is insulted by Gokul's wife and her father, has to leave Gokul's household in the company of her disinherited son. Gokul's follies complicate the situation as much as his wife's machinations, but in the end the bond of love uniting Bhabani and Gokul proves stronger than all obstacles, and the story ends

in reconciliation. Here, too, the situation is really intriguing: the step-mother Bhabani and the step-son Gokul, whose interests are bound to collide, both have advisers who are anxious to exploit the situation, and there is the will which disinherits one brother and vests the property in the other. The strength of this opposition is the measure of the enduring power of love which overcomes all the difficulties it has to face. *Harilakshmi*, a strikingly original story, treats of the joint family from another angle of vision. Harilakshmi is at once fascinated and irritated by a poor dependent relation Kamala, the wife of her husband's cousin, who arouses in her an acute inferiority complex, and half willingly she begins to oppress Kamala with the more than able assistance of her husband and his aunt. But the more she ill-treats Kamala, the more she realises her own smallness. When Kamala is brought before her to answer a charge of theft which she knows to be false, she feels that the roles have been reversed and that she herself is appearing as an accused before Kamala. In some other stories, the art is thinner, because this well-balanced opposition is not maintained. Take, for example, *Mejdia*, which is the story of Hemangini who proves more than a sister to the orphan Kesta, a dependent on his step-sister Kadambini, Hemangini's husband's brother's wife. Hemangini and Kadambini live in separate, though contiguous, establishments, and Hemangini's affection for Kesta in no way clashes with her interests. That is why the novelist has to imagine Kadambini as a she-monster who tortures Kesta almost as automatically as a machine turns its wheels. This makes the conflict artificial, and although Kesta and Hemangini are vividly drawn,

the story cannot be called a masterpiece. *Bindur Chhele* (*Bindu's Son*), a popular story, is artistically more defective still. Jadav and Madhav are two brothers who, with their wives Annapurna and Bindu, live in peace and happiness. Annapurna has a son Amulya, but as Bindu is childless, she commits the baby to the latter's care. Here there is no real clashing of interests, as the child is as much Bindu's as Annapurna's, and Bindu is deeply attached to both Jadav and Annapurna. There is no plot worth the name as also no scope for the strife of wills. In order to make up for these deficiencies, the novelist makes of Bindu a hysterical girl who is bent on raising a tempest over a tea-cup and who always provides occasions for the exhibition of cheap sentiment by herself and others. There is a strain of sentimentality in Sarat Chandra, and wherever he fails to project a real human problem, he tries to arouse interest by introducing episodes and dialogues full of mawkish pathos. *Bindur Chhele* is one of the worst offenders in this respect.

In some other stories Sarat Chandra gives a clearer impression of the intricacy of relationships in a joint family. In *Arakshaniya* (*The Old Maid*), Priya Nath and Anath Nath are two brothers who lived together for a long time and have then separated, Swarnamanjari, widow of Golak Nath, the eldest brother siding with Anath, the richer of the two. But as Priya Nath dies within a year of the separation, his wife Durgamani and daughter Jnanada have again to depend on Anath; they seek temporary shelter also with Durgamani's brother Shambhu and his wife Bhamini. Anath's wife is selfish and indolent, and her daughter might have been married to the young

man who is in love with Jnanada. But she is fundamentally good-hearted and proves a refreshing contrast to Swarnamanjari who, in her campaign of malice against the helpless mother and daughter, proves as terrible as a Greek fury. Shambhu is Durgamani's brother and should have been her support; Bhamini is a rough, quarrelsome woman who cannot be expected to have any sympathy for Durgamani and her daughter with whom she is first acquainted after years of her marriage when they seek temporary shelter in her house. Strangely enough, it is Shambhu who is eager to sacrifice his niece by giving her in marriage to an old widower, a rogue and a drunkard, a brother of Bhamini, for he expects to make some profit out of the transaction. This marriage, which would have been worse than death for Jnanada, falls through only on account of the fierce opposition of this ugly, boorish woman who has a soft heart behind a forbidding exterior. The greatness of Sarat Chandra's art lies in the way in which he discovers unsuspected depths of tenderness not only in Anath's lazy wife but also in the unpleasant Bhamini, the discovery being made so unexpectedly and yet so naturally that the author seems to be as much startled as either Durgamani or the reader. A similar revelation is found in another story *Biraj Bow* in which the heroine finds to her surprise that her sister-in-law (husband's brother's wife) whom she thought to be mean and selfish is possessed of a golden heart.

The most important story from our point of view is *Nishkriti (The Deliverance)* in which there is a large variety of characters, all sharply limned, but in which the protagonist is no individual man or woman but the Hindu joint family. It is the emphasis on the

standards set by the joint family, which gives unity to the multiplicity of incidents as also to the diversity of characters—old and middle-aged men and women as well as young urchins. Girish and Harish are two brothers, and their wives are Sidheshwari and Nayan-tara; they have a cousin Ramesh whose wife is Shailaja. Girish is an eminent lawyer with an enormous income, Harish is moderately successful—also as a lawyer. Ramesh has wasted much of Girish's money in unsuccessful commercial ventures and is unemployed at the time the story begins. Yet strangely enough, the control of the household is not in the hands of the breadwinner Girish or of his wife Sidheshwari nor in the hands of Harish and Nayan-tara but in those of Shailaja, the unemployed Ramesh's wife. In temperament the principal characters are widely different from one another. Girish, whose generosity is as large as his laughter, is absent-minded and forgetful of everything except his briefs. His wife Sidheshwari is an ignorant woman, equally simple, if not equally absent-minded. She has handed over the control of the household to Shailaja and thinks of nothing but the children whom she delights in feeding and fondling. It is not difficult to mislead this simple lady, but her heart is essentially sound. Ramesh is a do-nothing who has failed in his ventures and now spends his time over newspapers. His wife Shailaja, who is the central figure in the household, is entirely different; she is always active and manages the large household with an iron hand and with unimpeachable justice. But she is extremely sensitive and self-willed and does not easily yield her point. Harish and Nayan-tara, exceptionally mean and intent on buttering their own bread,

were absent from the joint family establishment for a long time. As soon as they come, troubles begin, for Shailaja and Nayantara will never agree, and Sidheshwari, the titular head, is powerless to exercise control. With infinite skill Sarat Chandra shows how extremely trivial things which nobody need remember give rise to serious family disputes because of the incompatibility of tempers and the opposition of interests. Shailaja and Ramesh leave the joint household and temporarily settle at their ancestral village home, and Harish soon starts a suit in his own name and in that of his absent-minded elder brother Girish in order to drive Ramesh from the village home, too. Girish, ever an unpractical simpleton, once goes to the village home when the litigation is in progress and thinking that Ramesh is ruining the family, executes a deed, transferring the whole of his own property in the name of Shailaja. The joint family is saved.

This story is an extraordinary piece of work from whatever point of view we may examine it. The daily round of activities in a household is so uneventful that nobody ever thinks that there is any scope for an interesting plot here. But in *Nishkriti*, we find that if there are differences in character and if some one is eager to feather his own nest, even the most trivial dispute, the most insignificant incident may lead to a thrilling crisis. The dénouement startles us by the element of unexpectedness; nobody could think that Girish, who has been made a complainant in the litigation instituted to eject Ramesh, would solve the tangle by giving over his own property to Ramesh's wife. But when we remember Girish's character, his absent-mindedness and his inability to think of him-

self except in terms of the joint family, we have no difficulty in understanding the way in which he is drawn into the litigation as also the manner in which he ends it. An eminent critic complains that Girish is too much of an idealised portrait, that the delineation is exaggerated. Exaggeration, we must remember, is the essence of art, there being as much of exaggeration in *King Lear* as in *The Pickwick Papers*. Only exaggeration, to be artistic, must observe the fundamental law that a character in fiction must be as full of vitality as a character in reality. He can be convincing if only he has that unity in variety which is the hallmark of life. In the portraiture of Girish, in spite of the obvious exaggeration, there is this combination of consistency and unexpectedness which makes the idealisation convincing. He who cannot distinguish between business in jute and business in straw will naturally think of outwitting Ramesh and protect his own interests by transferring his property to Ramesh's wife.

Girish's wife Sidheshwari is a homelier and more representative product of the joint family system. She is a silly woman who does not know that twelve multiplied by four plus two makes fifty. As she possesses neither intelligence nor personality, she is easily led by the nose; when Nayantara persuades her that Shailaja has been cheating her all these days, she half believes the accusation, but her heart is sound at bottom, and she cannot think of herself as an individual with an existence distinct from the joint family. She half drives away Shailaja, but is disconsolate on account of the absence of Shailaja's son and step-son and thinks of lodging a complaint for the recovery of the children. This simple woman is, indeed, very

deftly portrayed. She is afraid of Shailaja who is silent and sensitive, but although ignorant and timid, she knows how to tackle Shailaja, and when matters are moving to a crisis, she, with her direct insight into character, is eager to draw Shailaja into an open quarrel which, she knows, will easily dispel the cloud of misunderstanding. In spite of all her weaknesses, she is fundamentally large-hearted, tolerant and incapable of making a distinction between her own interests and those of other members. It is the tolerance and the unselfishness of people like Sidheshwari which make the joint family system a live institution that survives all the shocks it receives from the designs of intriguers. Sidheshwari is unique in the combination of strength and weakness, folly and wisdom we find in her, but she represents at its best the age old institution—the Indian joint family.

II

The essence of the joint family is adjustment between divergent temperaments and conflicting interests. In wedded life there is no collision of interests, but there may be an opposition of wills, for the husband or the wife may have mental angularities which even years of living together will not be able to smooth over. Some of Sarat Chandra's stories are about mal-adjustments in family life, the husband and the wife not being able to understand each other in spite of the community of interests and a sincere desire to make each other happy. Of such stories it will suffice to consider the two most characteristic products of Sarat Chandra's genius—*Kashinath*, which is saved

from being a tragedy by a last moment reconciliation and *Sati* (*The Faithful Wife*), a brilliant comedy in which laughter is mixed with embittered pathos. Kashi Nath is a silent man with mysterious depths in his character, which his wife Kamala, a slip of a girl, can hardly fathom. She tries to please him in a hundred ways, but Kashi Nath has too distinct a personality to be easily domesticated as a mere son-in-law in a rich man's house. What he muses on in his lonely saunterings, what makes him unhappy in a palatial home nobody knows; possibly he himself does not know either. But one thing is clear; he cannot fit into the pattern wrought out for him. Failing to win him over by cajolery and unremitting devotion, Kamala tries to subdue him first by silent neglect and then by open hostility. A clever manager sees the rift between the mistress and her husband, and it seems that he tries to get Kashi Nath murdered. Kashi Nath, however, is miraculously saved, and there is a final reconciliation between the husband and the wife. There are melodramatic touches in the delineation of Kamala's hostility to her husband, and the happy ending seems to be a concession to popular demand. But what is significant from the point of view of art is the suggestion, subtly conveyed all through the story, that there may be some delicate nuances of personality which mere good intentions and the sanction of law and tradition cannot obliterate.

Sati (*The Faithful Wife*) shares with *Mahesh* the distinction of being Sarat Chandra's greatest story. It gives us a glimpse of the misalliance that may spoil an apparently successful marriage. With difference in religion the form of marriage differs, but the fundamental idea is today everywhere the same. Marriage

should be monogamous, and a man and a woman, who are united in holy wedlock, should be true to each other, chastity in marriage meaning the absolute faithfulness of the partners to each other. This idea of mutual fidelity, if strictly interpreted, may restrict a man's freedom, and the most innocent activity may be liable to misconstruction. *Sati* is a vignette of wedded life; it shows how relentlessly terrible the holiness of marriage may be. The note of satire which runs all through the story is specifically true of the Hindu ideal of marriage which does not recognise divorce, but it has a universal appeal, for all marriages pretend to join two souls together and create absolute identity out of duality. Thus interpreted, *Sati* is a deadly commentary on the institution of marriage. Harish has a chaste wife Nirmala who, being of fidelity all compact, will not allow her husband to have anything to do with women; she watches him with Argus' eyes, and his slightest movements are subjected to such deep scrutiny that if he has to pass the test, he can have no life beyond earning money from male clients and keeping his wife company. How unbearable this arrangement may be is shown through a quick succession of suggestive episodes, narrated with telling economy and force. Whatever Harish does, whether he tells lies or speaks the truth, whether he mixes in clubs or remembers an old friendship or praises a female singer, he has no escape. The world has gone against him, and even the gods seem to join in the conspiracy, for when Harish is laid up with small pox, his wife goes to a temple with a vow to fast until her husband recovers, and he does recover. The logic of *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is applied, and there is no doubt in the minds of the people about Harish

that he is blessed with an angel of a wife ! The technical craftsmanship displayed in the story is extraordinary. It starts with a coarse joke, but we soon begin to discover that the joke is part of a well-laid plan, an offshoot of a severe ideal that will tolerate no compromise. Harish sinks deeper and deeper into the pit until he feels—and so do we—that only death can release him from the terrible beatitude of conjugal fidelity. The comparison drawn at the conclusion between Harish and God Krishna who, he thinks, was driven out of Brindaban by the unremitting faithfulness of Radha, is openly sarcastic, for it seems that the indirectness of innuendo and irony would be unsuitable for satire so devastating.

III

A distinctive feature of Sarat Chandra's work is the portraiture of the social *milieu*. *Palli Samaj* (*Rural Society*) and *Shrikanta* Parts I—IV are full of iridescent pictures of Bengali society in its many phases, but such representations, good as they are, give only detached views of social life. This impression of looseness of structure becomes stronger if *Rama*, the dramatic version of *Palli Samaj*, is considered. As the drama is bereft of the cementing commentary of the novelist, the isolated scenes stand out loosely and are only thinly connected with one another because of their common relation to the hero and the heroine. Some of Sarat Chandra's short stories, notably *Abhagir Swarga* (*Abhagi's Flight to Heaven*) and *Mahesh*, are remarkable for the way in which they create the social atmosphere and produce

on the reader's mind an impression of the surroundings in the midst of which an untouchable Hindu woman or a poor Muslim cultivator lives. The rigid economy demanded by the form of the short story excludes all circumstantial details and welds detached incidents into a single whole. These are stories of individuals, of a poor woman and of a poor man, but Abhagi and Gafoor are silhouetted against the sombre background of economic oppression and social ostracism.

Abhagir Swarga is much slighter than *Mahesh*, and the impression it produces is less powerful, but it is similar in appeal and has striking features of its own. Abhagi is a poor untouchable woman, belonging to the *Dule* caste. She had been left an orphan by her mother almost immediately after her birth, and her husband, who had already a wife when he married her, deserted her after the birth of her son Kangali Charan. Many people ask her to get married again, because such remarriages are permissible in the lower strata of Hindu society. But she does not do so; she remains faithful to the husband who has left her and ekes out a scanty livelihood for herself and her son. A short story has no room for detailed descriptions; there are one or two striking hints that on many days she can find a meal for her son but has herself to go without food. The long struggle with poverty tells on her health, and at thirty she dies. Before her death she begins to cherish a curious ambition for herself. She saw one day the funeral ceremony of a rich Brahmin Mukherji lady who died, leaving her husband and a host of relations. As this lady was put on the funeral pyre with great pomp, with vermilion on her brow and *Alaktak* paint on her feet, marks of

a woman whose husband is alive, and as the son of this lady started the cremation, Abhagi was overwhelmed with emotion and seemed to see, in the flames and smoke of the funeral pyre, the vision of a chariot descending from heaven to carry the fortunate old lady who had a worthy end, because she was spared the misfortune of widowhood and her cremation was begun by her son putting the burning brand inside her mouth. These are marks of supreme bliss for a married Hindu lady, and Abhagi, who has had a miserable life, dreams of a glorious end; for she, too, will die when her husband, a heartless deserter, is alive, and her son will cremate her. A chariot from heaven must come for her as it came for the Mukherji lady, and death will give her the glory and the joy of which life has defrauded her. When she falls ill, she does not care for recovery and calmly waits for death in expectation of the supreme bliss lying in store for her. But even this bliss is not available for a poor, untouchable woman. The Zemindar's *Naib* and *Darwan* will not allow Kangali to touch a tree in their own house, because they are tenants-at-will without any right. Kangali appeals to the Mukherjis who have been making preparations for a grand *Sradha* ceremony, and wants some wood so that his mother's last wishes may be fulfilled. They are callous to his entreaty, for they feel that it is a vain luxury for a poor untouchable woman; indeed, there are comments that by trying to cremate his mother's dead body Kangali is pretending to be a gentleman and stepping beyond an immemorial custom amongst the untouchables who never burn their dead bodies but bury them. These small touches, selected with great economy, give us glimpses of the Hindu society—

much of it is true of all capitalist societies—in which men and women belonging to a low caste have no privilege if they are poor. They have to forego all joys when they are living, they have even to forego the privilege of cremation when they are dead. When they visit the house of a Brahmin, the latter's first anxiety is if he has been defiled by the touch of a pariah.

Mahesh is much more powerful than *Abhagir Swarga*. Indeed, it is one of the greatest short stories of the world; the portraiture here is much more detailed; the impression is more concentrated and cumulative; the conclusion is reached through a series of telling strokes, each more stabbing than its predecessor. It is a story of unrelieved human suffering, which is made more deadly by the vein of irony running through it. Gafoor is a Muslim cultivator whose only friend is his bull Mahesh which is at once his breadwinner and his dependent. He is a poor man who has none else to look after him and is in the direst poverty, for he cannot procure food for himself or fodder for Mahesh. The picture of his poverty is drawn by means of a few lurid touches—the house is tottering, the cloths are in tatters, and he and his daughter cannot waste even the rice-gruel which is a part of their scanty meal. As Gafoor has no lands of his own, Mahesh constantly trespasses into other people's pasture and brings him into trouble. The harvest fails for two successive seasons, and Gafoor's difficulties know no bounds. Now it is that his love for Mahesh is put to a severe test, and he passes through it by killing the beast with his own hands. The poor cultivator's love for the beast is a striking contrast to the heartless attitude of the Brahmin

Zemindar and the Brahmin priest. The Brahminical religion enjoins the worship of the cow as a god, but in actual practice religious devotion has either been swamped by greed or has withered into a meaningless code. The difference between the poor cultivator's genuine love for the beast and the wealthy and pious Hindu's lip devotion is shown through a number of vivid pictures. Gafoor uses the straw of his thatched house to feed Mahesh, but even this does not last long—a heroic, though pathetic, contrast to the Brahmin Zemindar, who has misappropriated all the grazing lands of the village. When Mahesh strays into these fields, the beast is put into a pen from which Gafoor releases it by pawning some of his own scanty belongings. In his extreme misery, Gafoor thinks of selling the beast to a butcher, but the way in which the butcher contemplates the victim's hide makes his flesh creep, and he recoils from the transaction with horror. The irony becomes increasingly deadly when the Brahmin Zemindar, hearing of the proposal to sell the cow to a butcher, which is repugnant to the Hindu idea of the sacredness of the cow, becomes furious and punishes Gafoor, who accepts the sentence meekly. Gafoor is soon in a frenzy of despair, because he can find no means to feed either himself or his dear Mahesh, and Mahesh, too, becomes desperate in its hunger. It is in this mood that Gafoor one day kills Mahesh; the Brahmin Pandit, who is a complement to the Brahmin landlord, hastens to arrange for rites of penance and makes an estimate of the expenses, and the irony is complete. Gafoor accepts his fate with dogged resignation; he no longer considers it worth his while to cling to his homestead and his lands and joins a jute mill as a labourer. It is not

merely the story of an individual cultivator and his misery, but through his life history and especially through the sharp contrast drawn between the un-touchable, exploited Muslim peasant and his exploiters, the Brahmin Zemindar, the Brahmin Pandit and the sleek *Kayastha* householder Manik Ghosh, the darker side of social life in rural areas is presented with unsurpassable sharpness and vigour.

IV

Sarat Chandra's portraiture of children, especially in some of the stories considered above, calls for comment, for Sarat Chandra is nowhere more original than in his insight into child-psychology. Gayaram in *Mamlar Phal* is a slight sketch, intended more to bring out the latent maternal instinct in Gangamani than as a complete portrait, but the delineation of the children of varying ages in *Nishkriti* is superb, and Ram in *Ramer Sumati* is a unique creation. Sarat Chandra sympathises with the child's desires and dreams, but his portraiture of childhood is more humorous than mystical. He does not approach children as symbols of man's infinite longings as does Maeterlinck in *The Blue Bird* or Rabindra Nath in *The Post Office*, neither does he try to recapture the poetical irresponsibility of Barrie's Peter Pan. His children are more of the earth, earthy, and what he chiefly emphasises is the child's buoyant restlessness. Gayaram now wants food, then rejects what is offered by his aunt and goes out in a huff, comes back to accept the food offered, quarrels with the aunt, beats her and breaks her things and then again comes

to her for shelter. The same restlessness is found in Ram who does one thing now, forgets it the next moment and passes from one prank to another with the swiftness and the irresponsibility which are the hallmarks of childhood.

Another characteristic of children is their absorption in their own small affairs. These appear to be trivial to us, but their power of merging themselves in these trivialities makes them extremely interesting. Who will sleep on the right side of Sidheshwari and who on the left? Nothing can be more insignificant than this, but when Kanai, Patal and the other children begin fighting over this scrap of right, they do so with a wholeheartedness that is worthy of generals and statesmen. Of the two like fishes in the pond, which is Ganesh and which is Kartik? Nobody can say, not even Bhola, the faithful servant, but Ram seems to have their characteristics at the tips of his fingers. There are two images of Kali, *Smashankali* (Kali who presides over funeral pyres) and *Rakshakali* (Kali who protects the world); which of these has the larger tongue? The question is too absurd even to occur to any one. But to Ram it is a serious theological problem; he soon engages in fisticuffs in order to defend his theory and then completely forgets it. Sarat Chandra's command of juvenile psychology is seen in the way he contrasts the deep concentration of children and the insignificance of the subjects of their concentration.

A very fascinating trait in the character of a child is transparency. Not being experienced in the ways of the world, children think and act with a freshness and a simplicity which are a contrast to the sophistries of grown-up men. Ram is very vain about his

superiority to Bhola, his servant and assistant; so when Narayani wants to disarm his suspicion about a thing, she has only to say that even Bhola knows it, and Ram accepts her statement without a demur. He strikes Narayani with a green guava, quite by accident, but it has serious consequences. He is extremely sorry and begins to satisfy his conscience and convince others by all sorts of disingenuous pleas. He feels deeply for Narayani, and in order to realise how much pain she had, he begins to strike his own forehead with a green guava. The children in *Nishkriti* are engaged in a dispute over this thing or that, and one of them is reading a novel; as soon as Shailaja appears there, all of them become silent, pretending that they do not know if there was anything going on, one of them even shouting Geography lessons as if that is the only thing he has been busying himself about all this while.

All these portraits of childhood proceed from a humorous understanding of the ways of children. There are two stories—*Haricharan* and *Balyasmriti* (*Early Memories*)—which describe sad experiences relating to children. Of these *Balyasmriti* is the better. The central figure in this story is a boy cook named Gadadhar who suffers silently for the peccadilloes or crimes committed by others. The story is a slight sketch, but within its limited compass, the author succeeds in conveying faint but unmistakable suggestions of the young boy's fortitude and power of evoking emotion, of his sensitiveness and pride. Another important thing is the indelible impression Gadadhar leaves on the narrator of the story, a wild truant of a boy whose deep sentiments are awakened by his contact with this cook who suffers for his

own pranks and makes him realise the tragedy of human life, in which very often the innocent suffer and the guilty escape punishment. A remarkable feature of this story lies in its technical craftsmanship, in the delicate, unobtrusive touches by means of which Gadadhar's character is suggested rather than described.

V

The stories so far considered are in many ways remarkable, some of them like *Ramer Sumati*, *Nishkriti*, *Sati* and *Mahesh* being first-rate works of art both in conception and execution. But they are not the most distinctive products of Sarat Chandra's genius. He is chiefly interested in problems of women, specially of those whose love is not sanctioned by convention. Some of his earliest stories—*Anupamar Prem* (*Anupama's Love*), *Mandir* (*The Temple*) and *Alo-O-Chaya* (*Light and Shade*) show his interest in the complications inseparable from such love. It is significant that the heroines Anupama, Aparna and Surama are, all of them, widows and that all of them feel the irrepressible pulsations of the heart. In *Mandir*, Aparna with her strange religious fervour cannot find happiness in her husband's home, and her husband, who wants to woo her in a worldly way, cannot win her heart. The unhappy young man makes her a present which she declines. The husband dies of a broken heart, and she goes back to her temple and to the daily worship there which has fascinated her so much. In the temple, she becomes associated with a young priest who is something of a

simpleton, who arouses her sympathy, and sympathy may melt into love. This young man is made to give her a present, although he is too simple-hearted to understand the implications of such a present to a young widow, but strangely enough, it is the same article as was presented to her by her husband before his death. This time Aparna not only refuses the present but sternly rebukes the giver of it, asking him not to come to the temple again. A few days after this she hears that the boy is dead, and she is disconsolate with a mysterious sorrow that is deeper than pity. The climax in this story is reached through a cheap coincidence, and Aparna's emotions are not clearly revealed. But the suggestion is unmistakable. Has a widow the right to love? If she does feel the pangs of love, how is she to accommodate them to her sense of duty and religion? Bankim Chandra might say that she should control impulses of love, but Bankim Chandra's Manorama (*Mrinalini*) would retort, "Go to the Himalayas and ask the Ganges to cease flowing". As Aparna in this story does not analyse herself and realise the implications of her sorrow, it is not necessary for her to effect a reconciliation between the impulses of the heart and the dictates of duty. Surama in *Alo-O-Chaya* tries to solve the problem by getting the man whom she loves married to another girl, but this marriage, in spite of the best intentions of all the three parties, ends in unmitigated tragedy. In a short story it is not possible to portray in detail the conflict in Surama's heart amongst the various emotions that torture her—her love for Jainadatta, her realisation of the futility of this love, her desire to do good to him and her sympathy for his wife. But the author succeeds in mak-

ing a suggestion of waste; so much of noble emotion in all the three persons of the story is squandered to no purpose. Is the social law that sanctions so much of wastage to be accepted as sacred? Such questions are only faintly suggested, but the suggestions are sufficient to indicate a new way of thinking and feeling about love.

Anupamar Prem is significant in yet another way. The man, who loves Anupama and does not leave her when she is deserted by the whole world, is a drunkard whom she herself helped to send to jail. It is a new type of a hero, not the unblemished man of character but a drunkard and a convict. But it is clear that in the tenacity of his affection, in his capacity for forgiveness, in his understanding of Anupama's situation, he is not inferior to a blameless hero. Should we call such a man a criminal only because he ruins himself by his addiction to drink and runs after a woman who is not his wife? Or should we call him the heroic lover whose heart has not been deadened by conventional standards of good and evil? *Andhare Alo (Light in Darkness)* poses the same question from a different point of view. In this story a courtesan tries to ensnare an attractive young man Satyendra in her toils but finds herself in the clutches of a passionate love for her prospective victim. She realises, however, that such a passion can have no fruition, for she is a social outcast whose love the young man cannot accept without degrading himself. She blesses his wife and son and retires. Such renunciation seems to be the only solution of her problem. The most obvious purpose of the story seems to be to depict the change that comes over a woman of the town when she feels the stirrings of deep emotion. But this leads

to an important question: Is the woman who feels such a pure passion herself impure? This note of interrogation is the most distinctive feature of Sarat Chandra's later work; it is significant that it is suggested even by his earliest writings. Adopting a Shavian phrase, we may say that he was a free thinker even before he had learned to think.

VI

Of the other stories dealing with the complexities of love which society condemns as tainted, two deserve special mention—*Swami* (*The Husband*) and *Bilashi*. *Swami* has a little history of its own. The title was suggested by Deshabandhu C. R. Das, who considered it a great story. It is said that when it was published in *Narayan*, Deshabandhu, as proprietor and editor, sent Sarat Chandra a signed blank cheque, authorising him to put down any price he chose for the story and Sarat Chandra drew Rupees one hundred only. Sober criticism may not share all Deshabandhu's enthusiasm, but the story is striking in its own way. Apart from its unsurpassed felicity of style, it presents us with a hero, rare in Sarat Chandra's works, who is conventionally pious but has a large-hearted tolerance that may be looked upon as incompatible with the rigid discipline of orthodoxy. The portrait of Ghanashyam, the husband of Saudamini seems to suggest that Sarat Chandra is the enemy of conventional religion only when it confines itself to mere formalism and thus deadens the soul; but he also knows of a deeper kind of piety which illuminates, fortifies and expands.

The heroine Saudamini is even more striking than her husband. Her mind has been sophisticated by early studies in agnosticism, and her heart has known the thrills of stolen amour with Narendra, a young man who can take a desperate step in affairs of love. She is married to Ghanashyam, a devout Vaishnab, but she persuades herself that she is in love with Narendra and does not share her husband's bed. Gradually she is attracted by her husband's matchless character, but she quarrels with him over a trifle and elopes with Narendra. When she is away from her husband, she sees her blunder and realises that her heart is with him and that Narendra has no place there. The husband comes to her and accepts her with forgiveness. The crisis in the story is slurred over in haste, the elopement is not adequately motivated, and there is all through a strain of cheap sentimentality. But the story raises a deep problem about the mysterious workings of a woman's heart. If Saudamini is, indeed, so deeply attached to her husband, why does she elope with Narendra? Is it a mere passing caprice reinforced by family squabbles or is it possible that a woman may be drawn towards two persons at the same time, that Saudamini adores her husband for his goodness and nobility but that her heart yearns for Narendra's daring, passionate embrace? As the delineation is superficial, such questionings are only dimly suggested, and if we had not Sarat Chandra's greater works, possibly they would not have occurred at all. But it is these questionings which are significant for an understanding of the development of his art.

Bilashi is a much shorter and much better story than *Swami*. It is openly propagandist and is

important as showing how literature may be at the same time powerful propaganda and successful art. It contains a bitter attack on conventional morality, being the story of the romance of a high caste Hindu and a snake-charmer's daughter. It is written in the form of a diary by a village boy named Nyara; the diarist's name becomes suggestive when we remember that this was Sarat Chandra's own nickname and that as a young man he was very much fascinated by the snake-charmer's craft and lore. The hero of the story is a young man named Mrityunjoy, a do-nothing at school; no body knows for how many years he read in the third class, and he never makes his way up. Once when he falls dangerously ill and is friendless and alone, he is nursed with untiring devotion by Bilashi, a snake-charmer's daughter and an untouchable. The proximity, which is the result of prolonged illness and patient, vigilant attendance, leads to deep friendship that is sealed in marriage. Society condemns this union as immoral, and Mrityunjoy's uncle even leads a gang of assailants who make a brutal attack on the helpless girl. Mrityunjoy adopts the profession of a snake-charmer and although an outcast, lives happily with his wife for some time until one day he is bitten to death by a cobra, and Bilashi commits suicide by drinking poison. Conventional morality sees in these deaths the justice of the gods and heaves a sigh of relief. But what are we to say of this love between Mrityunjoy and Bilashi, which is based on deep mutual understanding, which has the courage to face ostracism and cements a union that is unbreakable even in death? We see the whole affair with the passionate zeal of the diarist Nyara and cannot but feel sympathy and respect for the holiness

of the heart's affections and also searching doubts about the value and sanctity of social morality which condemns but does not understand. The narrator eschews unnecessary details, he sheds all pretence to impartiality; he does not allow the protagonists to speak except very rarely, and the story has the emotional intensity of a lyric poem. The propaganda is not enunciated through cold argument; it is inseparable from vividly realised experience.

CHAPTER IV

WOMAN'S HEART

I

It has been pointed out in the preceding chapters that Sarat Chandra is chiefly interested in unravelling the intricate workings of a woman's heart, especially when it is in the grip of the absorbing passion of love. Even when love is not his theme, he delights in probing the mystery and complexity of a woman's soul, the best example being Harilakshmi in the story bearing her name. She is fascinated by Kamala to whom she wants to be friendly, but her fascination soon takes the form of rivalry and is expressed in a desire to humiliate the latter. Before long she finds that she has set rolling a ball she cannot recall; she desires to show her admiration and love, but she has become part of an engine of oppression she is powerless to control. The conflict and the contrast between the real emotion and its outward manifestation are drawn with extraordinary subtlety in this story. Sarat Chandra is, however, primarily the analyst of love, of forbidden love. Generally he portrays the puzzled disharmony of a woman's soul tortured by a love that is bound to meet frustration. But there are some stories—*Chhabi* (*The Portrait*), *Parinita* (*The Girl That Was Already A Wife*) and *Datta* (*The Betrothed*)—in which he deals not with the tragedy of frustration but with the romance of fulfilment. Some people say that *Datta* is the best of his works; certainly it makes the most pleasant reading of them all.

In these three stories we find that the heroes and the heroines are in love with one another and that they can easily be united, but some difficulties have to be overcome before the union can take place. *Parinita* does not deserve more than a passing notice, because it is based on a very slight misunderstanding. Shekhar is in love with his neighbour's niece Lalita who loves him, too. There is a temporary alienation, and Shekhar soon hears that Lalita has been married to one Girin, which makes him disconsolate. But one day he happens to meet Girin from whom he hears that the latter could not marry Lalita, because when the proposal was made, she replied that she was already a wife. Shekhar understands what this means, and there is no difficulty in the way of their union. The interest of this story lies in the clever manipulation of the plot so that Lalita may be estranged for a few days from Shekhar and Shekhar may not know who really Girin's bride is. This emphasis on a clever device allows of no scope for the study of character, and that is why although *Parinita* is delightful to read, it does not bear the characteristic mark of the author's genius. *Chhabi*, a short story which takes us to the romantic surroundings of a Burmese village in the days before the advent of the British, is a much better work of art than *Parinita*; it gives a delicately tender picture of the hero, but the heroine is presented as too absurdly capricious to be convincing.

Datta is a flawless piece of art. Its dialogue is sparkling, its plot impeccable, and its characterisation shows penetrating insight into human psychology. Banamali, Jagadish and Rash Bihari were three fast friends at school. In later life Banamali becomes

very prosperous, Rash Bihari is moderately successful, and both of them have turned Brahmos. Jagadish who remains a Hindu has fallen into evil ways and dies a broken man, heavily in debt to Banamali. When the story starts, Banamali is at his death-bed; it is hinted that he has betrothed his daughter Bijaya to Narendra, Jagadish's son. After Banamali's death, his old friend Rash Bihari, an old man, becomes Bijaya's guardian and claims that Banamali has betrothed her to his son Bilash for whom Bijaya, too, has some liking. In course of a few days Bijaya meets Narendra, an attractive but absent-minded young man and falls deeply in love with him. But she is in the toils of a resourceful intriguer who claims her for his son by virtue of her father's wish which he cleverly interprets in his own way. Bijaya's situation becomes still more complicated, because she has reason to suspect that Narendra neglects her and makes love to another girl Nalini. This suspicion proves too much for her, and she agrees to accept Bilash as husband. Just at this moment Bijaya makes two startling discoveries—her father's betrothal of her to Narendra expressed in a letter and the hollowness of her suspicion about the entanglement with Nalini. All Rash Bihari's intrigues fall through, and Narendra and Bijaya are married. Strangely enough it is Bilash whom Bijaya, before her meeting with Narendra, chose for her life's partner. In the story, it is found that when she is being drawn towards Narendra, some external pressure makes her veer round towards Bilash, but as the scales are loaded in favour of Bilash, Narendra suddenly appears on the scene, and the depths in Bijaya's heart are at once stirred. It is in this way that Sarat

Chandra unravels, with the help of small incidents, the mysterious workings of a woman's heart.

The predominant impression produced by this novel is one of perfect propriety, everything being exactly adequate for the purpose for which it is introduced. Although Rash Bihari's intrigues are very ably managed, Bijaya might have resisted till the last moment if it were not for the complication added by Nalini. Again, although Bijaya might resist Rash Bihari till the end, she has so much of maidenly shyness that she would not have been able to take the initiative in her own hands but for the advent of Nalini. This impression of adequacy is reinforced by Sarat Chandra's handling of character, which is just commensurate with the necessities of the plot. No villain in Sarat Chandra's novels is engaged in the intricate self-examination that is the secret of greatness in Edmund or Iago; but Rash Bihari never seems to be an automaton mechanically propelled by the motive of self-interest. His capacity for intrigue is so manysided, his plans spring so spontaneously from his brain that he becomes a live character by virtue of sheer inventive genius. Narendra belongs to the type Sarat Chandra is very fond of creating—vigorous in body, generous of heart, but, although not immoral, absent-minded, unpractical and slightly eccentric. His nobility fascinates Bijaya, but his absent-mindedness embarrasses her. Bilash is an exact foil to Narendra—physically undistinguished and possessed of a mean mind and an ignoble heart. It is, however, in the portraiture of the heroine that Sarat Chandra is as ever at his best. She possesses a strong will and a passionate heart, but she has more than a normal share of maidenly shyness, she is in

the tentacles of an octopus, and the man she loves is too unworldly to be able to see through her reserve. The delicate see-saw between her shyness and the impulse of her heart constitutes the principal charm of the novel.

II

Excellent as *Datta* is from all points of view, it gives only an imperfect idea of Sarat Chandra's genius which, it cannot too often be repeated, is in its element in portraying women whose love is not sanctioned by religion. The first novel to be considered from this point of view is the one that was about the first to be published—*Baradidi* which won instantaneous recognition and is even now a favourite. It is the story of a young widow Madhabi who is the mistress in her father's household, looking after all the dependents in it. One of these dependents is a strange creature, a learned scholar named Surendra Nath, who is unpractical, forgetful, absent-minded and eccentric. It is his helplessness which first attracts Madhabi's curiosity and excites her sympathy. She is soon amazed at the extraordinary character of the man who makes absurd demands on her, for his compass and his spectacles, or cloths for beggars as well as for his own necessities, but who has not met her and does not know how impossible his demands are. Gradually her interest in an eccentric scholar and sympathy for a helpless vagrant deepen into the stronger emotion of love which is portrayed in a vivid and original way. Being a Hindu widow for whom remarriage is banned, she cannot think of falling in

love with a man, and it is no wonder, therefore, that the love which is awakened for Surendra Nath fills her heart without her being at first aware of it. It is an emotion that rises spontaneously, in spite of herself. Sarat Chandra's insight into women's hearts is seen in the way in which he delineates her character; he does not judge or describe it from without but reveals it from within. He traces it to the hidden recesses of the heart where it is at first unconscious and puts on disguise after disguise until all veils are withdrawn and the love appears in an unmistakable form. At first, it seems to be a craving for gratitude or even less than that, only a desire to be remembered, but along with it there is a gentle curiosity about the man, his antecedents and equipments. After this, love becomes stronger and the disguising thinner. Madhabi goes to Benares, just to make Surendra Nath feel her absence. She thinks that it is only a joke; but the joke which takes the form of a desire to shake his indifference and make him feel her absence is only a mask under which the loving heart hides its longing for response. When she becomes aware of her weakness and realises its implications, she sends Surendra Nath away, and the first part of the story is over.

The second part is much less original than the first. The young author cannot carry the analysis further, the conflict between the Hindu widow's conscience and the young woman's newly awakened emotion comes to a sudden stop. The second part depends for its effect less on the analysis of character than on cheap coincidence, and the conclusion is melodramatic. But whatever may be said of the emphasis on a sudden turn in the plot and other weak-

nesses, there is no doubt that in the earlier chapters of this story, there is a new way of looking at forbidden love, Madhabi being different both from Bankim Chandra's Rohini who is portrayed as a monster and from Rabindra Nath's Binodini who is presented as a phenomenon. The new note is the note of sympathy; the author looks upon Madhabi's love as a spontaneous and beautiful emotion that wastes itself for nothing.

Debadas, another early work that has become justly famous, is more aggressive in tone. It draws the picture of Debadas and Parbati, who are playmates in childhood and in early adolescence. The story is reminiscent of Bankim Chandra's *Chandrashekhar* in which Pratap and Shaibalini are youthful playmates. Debadas and Parbati fall in love just as Pratap and Shaibalini do in *Chandrashekhar*. In both the novels, complications arise, because, on account of social difficulties, the love cannot reach fulfilment in marriage. The attitudes of the two authors are, however, strikingly different. Having little sympathy for love that has no social sanction, Bankim Chandra takes Shaibalini through a process of purgation until her love for Pratap is transformed into fidelity to her husband. Sarat Chandra's attitude to the love between Parbati and Debadas is one of sympathy; he makes a compromise between duty and love. Parbati is dutiful to her husband and her husband's people, but her love for Debadas remains as intense—and Sarat Chandra suggests—as sacred as ever. The effect of Parbati's marriage has disastrous consequences for Debadas, who becomes morose and wants to drown his misery in drink. He comes in contact with a fallen woman named

Chandramukhi, another characteristic product of Sarat Chandra's imagination, who after her meeting with Debadas, becomes a changed woman. She abandons her profession, becoming deeply devoted to Debadas who, half in affection and half in jest, calls her *Bow* which means wife. But the deep scar left by Parbati's marriage to another man remains as fresh as ever; Debadas is now a confirmed drunkard, and when he feels that his days are numbered, he hurries to the village which is Parbati's home, but when Parbati gets information about his arrival, he is already dead. At the conclusion, the author speaks in the first person, appealing to the reader to show sympathy for his hero.

There are many marks of immaturity in this novel. It has some patches of cheap sentiment, the conclusion is, again, melodramatic, and the heroine's attitude to her husband is enigmatic. The portraiture of Parbati in the second half shows neither analytic power nor capacity for hard thinking. How does she reconcile herself to the performance of duty to her husband and his children when her heart is wedded to her former lover? Immediately before her alliance with Bhuban Mohan Chaudhuri, Debadas came to see her and proposed marriage, but Parbati, who had before this been refused by Debadas, proved adamant. Does she subsequently repent her obstinacy? Does she not realise the emptiness of her dutifulness to her husband? To all these questions, the novel suggests no answer; Sarat Chandra shrinks from facing the problem he poses. In spite of its many weaknesses in both conception and execution, *Debadas* is remarkable in many ways. Reference has already been made to the original atti-

tude he takes up towards childhood romance. More important than this is his sympathy for Debadas who, as a hero, is entirely different from Pratap. He is a drunkard, he visits a brothel, and he lacks self-control. It is not, however, his weakness but his capacity for feeling and understanding deep emotion that makes him such a fascinating character. Another significant feature is the author's appreciation of a fallen woman when there is the stirring of deep love in her. The novel owes its popularity as much to this original attitude to life as to the author's power of vividly representing intense emotion. This power reaches its height in the scene in which Parbati meets Debadas alone at night and makes a desperate appeal to him to take courage in both hands and marry her.

"Do you speak of my shame? No. I am beyond the reach of scandal. If anybody blames me for coming to you alone by night, that blame will not touch me."

"What is the matter, Paru? Are you weeping?"

"Debadada, do you not know of the depth and the volume of water in a river? Shall not so much of water cover my shame?"

Suddenly Debadas seized Parbati by both her hands and spoke out, "Parbati".

Parbati fell at Debadas's feet and said in a choked voice, "Do please give me a little shelter here, Debadada".

For a moment they were silent, both of them. A tear trickled down Debadas's foot and fell on the white bedding.

Quite a long time after this, Debadas raised Parbati's drooping face and said, "Paru, Do you feel absolutely helpless if I fail you?"

Parbati spoke not a word. She remained in that posture, resting her hand on Debadas's feet. There was dead silence, except only for Parbati's deep panting which filled the room like an undulating, swelling current. It was two in the morning: the clock struck the hours with a ding-dong sound. Debadas cried out, "Paru".'

A passage in a novel loses much of its charm, if it is torn from its context, and no translation can recapture the magic of Sarat Chandra's style. But if we make allowance for these limitations, the above extract may give some idea of his ability to draw a direct, vivid and detailed picture of an emotion which, in its most intense moment, has thrown off all disguise and circumlocution.

III

Biraj Bow, which was published in *Bharatbarsha* and must have been written years after *Baradidi* and *Debadas*, shows a distinct falling off in artistic conception and craftsmanship. Its heroine is a faithful wife, who strays from the path of chastity, if judged by purely external standards, but the author shows that she remains a faithful wife till the end. Sarat Chandra's thesis seems to be that the most pious wife may have an aberration and that a woman's character should be judged with sympathy and not in terms of any conventional ideal. Biraj is married to Nilambar, a noble-hearted Vaishnab, who is another typical Sarat Chandra hero—generous, self-sacrificing, but addicted to intoxicants. Biraj, who was married at nine and has been an exemplary wife

for several years, is faced suddenly with terrible poverty; her husband is in heavy debt, all his assets are gone, and Biraj has even to go to a poor untouchable for loan of coarse rice which she wants to cook for her husband. One day she is ill and has starved for three days when her husband, who is under the influence of intoxicants, beats her. In a frenzy she leaves him and meets a rich young Zemindar who has been trying to seduce her for many days. As soon as she enters her cabin in a boat, the fit of delirium that has brought her to the young man is at an end, and she jumps into the water.

The rest of the story need not detain us, for the important thing is not the plot but Biraj's character. It is easy to condemn a conventional society that will not consider the special circumstances which make her go to the young man who cannot even touch her. Hardy, in portraying the character of Tess, wants to put forward the thesis that his heroine is "a pure woman". Sarat Chandra seems to have some such idea in his mind, although he does not append a subtitle to his novel. But whatever allowance we may make for the moral implications of Sarat Chandra's thesis, the portraiture of Biraj is not psychologically convincing. In the earlier part of the story she lectures tirelessly on her fidelity which seems to be an obsession with her. It is not difficult to understand the effect of grinding poverty, but that is not an adequate explanation of her fall. A contributory cause is Nilambar's thoughtless jealousy which makes him beat his wife under the effect of intoxication. But even that is not enough; that is why Sarat Chandra portrays Biraj as delirious with fever. But is there somewhere in her heart a deep, hidden desire

to meet the man who has been waiting patiently for her? The novel throws no light on this question; the novelist seems to be too timid to face it. As it is, the crucial action in the novel is unconvincing, because it has not been adequately motivated.

Of the novels Sarat Chandra wrote on his return to Calcutta from Burma, *Palli-Samaj* (*Rural Society*) made an immediate impression. Its dramatic version *Rama* staged by Sishir Kumar Bhaduri has also been a great success. Here we have a story of rural poverty and rural politics, of the bad Zemindar's oppression and the good Zemindar's idealism, and into the texture of this story is woven the nostalgic romance of frustrated, youthful love. The hero Ramesh Ghoshal and the heroine Rama fell in love when they were boy and girl, but there could be no marriage because of social barriers; Rama is a *Kulin* and Ramesh is not. Rama is married but soon becomes a widow; Ramesh leaves the village for higher studies abroad. When the story begins, Ramesh has returned to the village, but he is still a bachelor, and Rama has become a widow. Ramesh remembers keenly the old friendship, but Rama, now a widow, is outwardly less responsive. Ramesh sets about improving the lot of the poor villagers and is stoutly opposed by his cousin Beni, a villainous village landlord. Strangely enough, in his noble endeavours, Ramesh finds, ranged on the side of his enemies, his former sweetheart who has been bullied by the rascally Beni and his satellites. Here we have the most characteristic touch of Sarat Chandra's genius. The heroine, a young widow very much afraid of scandal, remembers the old tie even more fervidly than does Ramesh, and she is fascinated, too, by Ramesh's

nobility and idealism. But she cannot give any expression to her feelings except in fitful, half-unconscious outbursts, because as a widow she cannot have anything to do in the way of love and friendship with a young man, and she is ensnared by clever intriguers who use her in their campaign against Ramesh. Ramesh is bewildered; he cannot understand either the open hostility or the furtive friendship. The hostility reaches its climax when Rama's evidence in a court of law helps Beni to send Ramesh to jail. The strain of this effort proves too much for her; she broods and broods until she becomes a consumptive. When Ramesh returns from jail, he finds that Rama has completely broken down. She throws off part of her reserve, half openly acknowledges her deep feeling for Ramesh and then retires to Benares.

The detached pictures of rural society are conceived and executed with great accuracy and charm. The villain Beni Ghoshal, although delineated from the outside, is an arresting portrait and so is his lieutenant Gobinda Ganguly. Bishweshwari, Beni's mother, who is the mouthpiece of Sarat Chandra's idealism, attracts the reader in the earlier chapters but becomes boring the story proceeds. The principal charm of the novel, which is also its most original feature, is the portrait of the heroine who has to hide her emotion under the guise of indifference and even of hostility. But whenever she is away from the gaze of others, whether in the solitary retreat of Tarakeshwar or engaged in lonely talk with her brother who is too young to understand the meaning of her queries, her love finds expression, though even here the expression is restrained, because a Hindu widow can have no affair of the heart. Her emotion

becomes articulate also on one or two rare occasions when the tension in the rural society reaches a crisis. Love which runs like a subterranean current comes to the surface whenever it gets an opportunity, the author's originality consisting chiefly in the portraiture of the interplay between the primal instinct of the heart and the forces arrayed against it. But in this novel there is the same timidity that is found in *Debadas* and *BirajBow*. Too much of emphasis is laid on Beni's machinations, and it is not clear what compromise or reconciliation Rama would have been able to effect between her love and her religion if she had been more free from external pressure. The result is that the conflict in Rama's soul is often superficial, there is an impression that the depths of the heart are not sounded, and her outbursts of emotion are tinged with sentimentality and melodrama.

Charitraheen is a more ambitious novel than *Palli-Samaj*. The significance of the title has already been referred to. The novel is remarkable also because of the complexity in its plot and of the two wonderful heroines it portrays. Sabitri is a maidservant in a mess, but it is gradually revealed that she is a Brahmin widow who had been seduced by a relation who had promised to marry her but was not true to his promise. She sent the rascally seducer away, and as, according to the standards of conventional morality, she is a fallen woman who can not return to the household from where she eloped, she adopts the lowly profession of a maidservant in a mess in Calcutta. Here she falls in love with Satish, the *Charitraheen* (Characterless) hero of the novel. The discovery of a woman of high caste and character in a maidservant in a Calcutta mess is a

novel idea, and the revelation of Sabitri's love for Satish is made with consummate art. Sabitri is known to be a fallen woman; she is free from the social restraints that impede self-expression in an aristocratic lady like Rama. The conflict she faces is, therefore, largely an inner conflict. As a widow and a social outcast, she knows that her love for Satish is bound to end in frustration, and she does not object to Satish's marriage to Sarojini. She, therefore, masks her love sometimes under a garb of indifference, occasionally of cruelty. But her love is so deep that in spite of all her efforts at self-control, it is expressed in an unmistakable manner. She fascinates Satish, but she is eager to repel him, because she knows that his passion for her will do him no good, the desire for self-effacement being thus opposed by the stronger and half-unconscious craving for self-expression. In the later sections of the novel, Sarat Chandra is anxious to find for this outcast a place in society, and he makes the puritanical Upendra recognise the unsullied purity of her character. There are touches of melodrama in this episode, which is not also psychologically convincing. After Satish has been married to Sarojini, Sabitri can have little to do in the novel. But as Sarat Chandra is eager to give her a heroic exit, Upendra, the man of character, must recognise the greatness of the woman whom he supposed to be without any character. In order to make this change convincing the novelist portrays the death of Surabala, Upendra's wife, so that Upendra may receive, in a proper mood, Mokshada's revelations about Sabitri's past. The rest of the episode is only an exchange of sentimentalities that have little artistic value.

The other heroine of the story, Kiranmayee, is very different from Sabitri. She is deeply read in books, but has not had anything in the way of love from her husband, a book-worm. An intellectual rebel who realises the hollowness of accepted values and beliefs, she has also unsatisfied cravings and is hungry for emotional and sexual satisfaction. She is a remarkable phenomenon rather than a normal woman. She is the exponent of a heretical philosophy which delights in tearing convention to tatters and, indeed, goes even deeper, for it respects no inhibitions and is not bound by any scruple, moral or religious. But her scepticism is not cold ratiocination; it becomes an element in living art, because it illuminates her actions. Being a sceptic, she is a tireless experimenter in the field of emotion; she responds, without scruple, to the advances of the skunk of a doctor who attends on her dying husband, and when she meets Upendra, her husband's friend, she at once falls in love with him. Here she gets a cold rebuff, and then from Upendra's wife, she tries to learn the secret of wifely devotion, but the husband soon dies. The feeling for Upendra awakens now with renewed vigour, and being unable to make any impression on him, she takes a monstrous revenge by seducing Upendra's cousin and ward Dibakar who is like a son to her. In seducing this boy, she feels no compunction of conscience and carries on the intrigue without any decorum in conduct. She elopes with Dibakar to Akyab, and there she comes to realise that she has toyed with a force stronger than herself. She faces poverty and squalor, and there is a wealthy Marwari constantly pressing her to be his concubine. All this is, however, of little consequence beside the

terrible lustfulness of Dibakar whom she has herself tempted but whom she has never loved and whose sexual demand she cannot satisfy. From this hell she is rescued by the arrival of Satish who is just like a younger brother to her. As she returns to Calcutta and meets her old acquaintances and sees the dying Upendra, memories of the life she has laid waste awaken in her, but the strain proves too much for her nerves and her mind, and she becomes insane.

The characterisation of Kiranmayee is the most original thing in the novel; its weakest feature is the construction of plot. There is no real link between the story of Sabitri and that of Kiranmayee. Sarat Chandra makes Upendra meet Sabitri and acknowledge her as his spiritual sister for whom he leaves the whole of his property. Satish, who is like a younger brother to both Upendra and Kiranmayee, may be said to be the principal bond of unity between the divergent stories, but as Satish has really little to do in the affair of Kiranmayee, and as the meeting of Upendra and Sabitri is a melodramatic contrivance, the author's attempts at unifying the different episodes and characters have not succeeded. Again, the affair of Sarojin, which has only a slender connexion with the two principal themes, has been elaborated unnecessarily. The result is that there are three stories which hang loosely together and cannot produce the impression of an artistic whole. It seems that the different parts of the novel were written at different times; it has even been said that some of the later chapters were written before the earlier ones. Whatever may be the history of its composition be, this novel, although it is important for an understanding of Sarat Chandra's attitude to life,

and although it contains two striking portraits, is spoilt by patches of sentimentality and gives an imperfect idea of his skill in construction.

IV

Sarat Chandra's greater novels *Shrikanta* (I-III), *Grihadaha* (*The Wrecked Home*) and *Dena-Paona* (*Debit and Credit*) are free from these defects of sentimentality, timidity and constructional weakness. As *Dena-Paona* is simpler in both conception and construction than the other two, and as it is also inferior to both of them, it may be considered first in this group. Alaka and Jibananda were married when Alaka was barely ten years old, and Jibananda, a scapegrace, left her almost immediately after the ceremony. When they meet again, Jibananda is a drunken, dissolute Zemindar, and Alaka has become a *Bhairabi*, a priestess in a temple. The law governing *Bhairabis* is that they must be married women, but must not touch their husbands. Alaka's name has been changed into Shodashi, and she carries on her religious duties with great zeal without thinking for a moment that she could ever have a normal woman's life. Then suddenly she meets Jibananda when he is suffering from excruciating pain, the result of his excesses, and Shodashi has to give him medicine with her own hands. This simple incident transforms her whole existence. Jibananda cannot at once recognise in the grave priestess his abandoned wife, but Shodashi knows to whom she administers medicine. She has touched him, and her career of a priestess is over. What is more, the meet-

ing with Jibananda re-kindles the normal longings of a woman in her, and she realises the futility of the life she has been living all these days. But she knows, too, that as she is a dedicated priestess, the ordinary woman's life is closed for her and that she can not live with the husband she has touched. It is this disharmony in Shodashi's soul which constitutes the principal theme of this novel. She can neither remain Shodashi nor become Alaka over again.

In the portraiture of this conflict greater stress is laid on the spiritual struggle in Shodashi's soul than on the pressure of external circumstances, though these, too, are not ignored. Nobody knew of the relationship between Shodashi and Jibananda; if, therefore, she wanted to continue as a priestess, she could have done so without much difficulty. But it is her own religious sentiment which stands in the way. Jibananda is a tyrant and has her brought to him by force, but she bears false witness in favour of him, involving herself in a scandal. She does this neither under pressure nor out of pity, but because the dormant Alaka has awakened at the touch of Jibananda; even the sound of this name in Jibananda's lips sends a thrill of longing through her soul. She resigns her office as priestess, not because there is a conspiracy against her—she might have broken it to pieces—but because she has lost all interest in the work that has hitherto absorbed her. She has known men and women all these years, has seen their troubles and heard their complaints and prayers, but all that has not touched her, for she has been only a detached spectator of their weal and woe. But now when she

sees a married couple—Nirmal and Haima—and their normal domestic life, the deepest yearnings in her heart are awakened. She has been the friend and protector of the poor, and there is a conspiracy to deprive them of their rights to the land. When they complain about this to her, the old fire of the priestess awakens, and she urges them to avenge their wrongs, but as soon as she realises that the leader of the wrongdoers is Jibananda, she shudders at the possible consequences of her own act. The psychological insight with which this agonised struggle in her soul is portrayed is in keeping with the skill with which the plot is developed. There is not a single loose thread; all the strands have been woven with one end in view—the unsolved problem of Shodashi's life, the mysterious longings and inhibitions in her soul.

Sarat Chandra's *Shrikanta*, which is his most famous, if not his greatest novel, is remarkable from many points of view. When it first appeared as a serial in *Bharatbarsha*, it was called *Shrikanta's Travel Diary*. It combines the techniques of more than one art form; it is partly a story of adventure, partly a travel diary and partly a novel of love, and through it runs like a thread the author's philosophy of life. There are innumerable episodes and the number of characters is immense, but it is a tribute to the author's creative genius that the total impression is of an organic whole rather than of an amorphous conglomeration. The complex harmony of this novel, which is almost as large as an epic, is maintained in a variety of ways. The three most prominent women here—Annada Didi, Rajlakshmi, the heroine, and Abhaya—are sharply distinguished from one another. Annada Didi accepts without

hesitation or complaint the husband whom she has got by way of conventional marriage. For the sake of this husband she flies away from society, half abandons her religion, because the husband has become a Muslim, and faces poverty and shame. The husband is a murderer and a brute, and yet there is not even a murmur of protest from her. Abhaya was married to a man who is possibly worse than Annada Didi's husband, who is fittingly compared to a wild buffalo out of the deep forests of Burma. He married Abhaya in Bengal, went to Burma where he lived with a Burmese woman who bore him children, and then completely forgot the girl whom he had left behind in Bengal. Abhaya comes over to Burma, and Shrikanta forces this rascally husband to take back the wife who has gone through so much trouble to meet him. But in course of a few days he tortures Abhaya and drives her away. Abhaya openly pooh-poohs the conventional ideal of wifely fidelity and accepts Rohini, the young man who is passionately fond of her and considers no sacrifice too great for the happiness of getting her. In the eye of religion Abhaya is undoubtedly a concubine, but she declares that her union with Rohini is based on truth which is far more sacred than the fiction imposed on her by a thoughtless, irrevocable social law. The heroine Rajlakshmi is equidistant from Annada Didi and Abhaya; she can neither accept the conventional ideal of society nor reject it. She fell in love with Shrikanta when as a young girl she was his fellow-pupil and playmate in the Primary School of their village. But she is married to another man whom she does not meet for more than a day or two, and before long she becomes a widow. One of the reasons for which she

cannot be united to Shrikanta is that as a Hindu widow, she cannot love him or any other man, but her passion for him is the most fundamental trait in her character; it is deeper than the sense of wifely fidelity enjoined by religion. The conflict and interaction between these two forces which commingle like two powerful streams is part of the mystery of her soul. Each of these three women is remarkable in her own way. But there is one thing common to them; each is a fallen woman in the eye of conventional society, and not one of them can reasonably be condemned as such. Each of them shows the hollowness of conventional judgment, and through these three women the hero pleads for a new orientation of our attitude to life and love, for a broadening of the ideals of society.

The multifarious experiences that are recorded in the first three parts of the novel have, in some way or other, their bearing on the same theme—the real value of social sanction and religious taboo. A Bengali young man marries a Burmese woman who is passionately devoted to him. The young man's elder brother comes to wean him from this union which, in his opinion, is only an aberration to which he does not attach much importance; it is at least not so bad as going to a restaurant and eating the flesh of the forbidden bird! The young man leaves the poor girl on the pretext of going to Rangpur to purchase tobacco, takes as much of her money as he can lay hands on, mocks at her affection for him and then deserts her for ever. He is a heartless brute, but in casting off the woman who loves her, is he not conforming to the social tradition that does not recognise a marriage between a Bengali Hindu and a

Burmese woman? In the village of Bithoura in Bihar Shrikanta meets a girl who is the daughter of a Hindusthani domiciled in Bengal, but she and her sister have had to be married in Bihar, because men of their caste are not available in Bengal. In that village in Bihar, she is an alien cut off from her own people, and she is subjected to great tyranny; her sister, who, too, was married in the same village, committed suicide, and she might follow in her footsteps. What, it may be asked, is the value of the rigidity of caste distinctions that enforce unremitting obedience but take no account of human happiness and misery?

Rajlakshmi cannot accept Shrikanta, because she cannot prove false to a marriage bond that was sanctified by the utterance of hymns from the holy *Vedas*. She and Shrikanta are drawn to each other by ties of human love, but such love has not had the sanction of divine *Vedic* hymns. In the village of Gangamati, in the district of Birbhum, they attend a marriage amongst untouchables and find that the hymns uttered by the ignorant priests there are only a travesty of the verses as they are written in the sacred books. If the *Vedic* hymns are sacred and the union brought about by the utterance of these hymns is alone imperishable, then what is to be said of marriages amongst these low caste people who mangle the texts beyond recognition? This marriage, which is almost a mockery of orthodox rites, moves Rajlakshmi to laughter, but it raises a question that is significant. Marriages performed by these ignorant priests have lasted as well, or as ill, as marriages in which the form has been more strictly observed. If that is so, what special value is there in the sanction of tradition and religion?

The affair of Nirudidi leads to a more fundamental problem. Niru is a young Hindu widow who has the noblest of hearts and spends her days mostly in the service of others. Suddenly it is found that she is pregnant and has had, therefore, illicit sexual intercourse. Society, if it has to exist, cannot tolerate sexual relations outside the ambit of marriage, and Nirudidi dies in poverty and shame, a social outcast. Shrikanta does not hold out a plea for sexual promiscuity, but it may be asked whether society has not made a fetish of chastity and given to marital fidelity an importance it does not deserve? It is in this way that most of the digressions that seem to be unconnected converge on the central theme of the novel—the spiritual significance and practical value of social morality and religious canon as applied to women.

The character of Shrikanta is the thread that binds the divergent episodes together. Shrikanta seems to accept his experiences as they come to him; he does not dominate them. Indeed, he realises that in the conflict in Rajlakshmi's soul between her love for him and her duty towards religion, he cannot play a leading role. She carries him with her and may one day even abandon him. When, however, Rajlakshmi says that no man, she has known or can even think of, is greater than Shrikanta, she may be speaking with a sweetheart's partiality, but she says what is fundamentally true. The greatness of Shrikanta does not lie in the performance of any heroic deed but in the possession of a tolerant heart that understands before it condemns. Shrikanta responds to Rajlakshmi's love which is as irrepressible as a mighty current, but he is not carried away by it. He knows how to

exercise self-restraint and has sympathy mixed with awe and amusement for her religious austerities and her hopes about a Hindu widow's heaven. He respects orthodoxy when he finds it manifested in Sunanda, a Brahmin Pandit's daughter and a Brahmin Pandit's wife whose lofty sentiments and strong character seem to be a gift of Brahminical culture and tradition.

The innumerable episodes and characters are all organically connected with the main story, because they exercise a formative influence on Shrikanta. The most important of these influences is Indranath who represents in a wonderful manner the restless energy of youth, impatient of convention, fearless of danger and yet strangely governed by superstition. It is the companionship with Indranath which lays the foundation of Shrikanta's philosophy of tolerant understanding and makes him open to impressions of all kinds. Men and things pass by him as in a panorama; he does not try to control them but understands them all—Haripada Mistri's vanity as well as Nanda Mistri's conjugal felicity and worry, Manohar Chakravarti's love for lucre as well as Satish Bharadwaj's addiction to country liquor, Sunanda's orthodoxy as well as Abhaya's intransigence.

Although Shrikanta is the narrator of the epic novel and although the experiences recorded here all happen to him, Rajlakshmi and not Shrikanta is the protagonist of the story. In Rajlakshmi all Sarat Chandra's earlier creations seem to reach their full development; she is Madhabi, Parbati, Rama and Chandramukhi rolled into one. She is a young widow like Madhabi and Rama, there is in her story the nostalgic romance of an early friendship as in the

stories of Rama and Parbati, and although not exactly a prostitute, she is a social outcast like Chandramukhi. She has to face the same problems that confront the other heroines, but in her soul the struggle is much more intense, because it is much more inward and much more complex. It is a heartless social code that makes her marriage a mockery; if she had been able completely to surrender herself to her love for Shrikanta, society would not have respected the union, and it is the pressure of poverty that makes her adopt what, for a Brahmin widow, is a life of shame. But whatever importance may be given to these forces pressing from the outside, the novelist illuminates the character from within. It is the inner conflict and the interplay amongst emotions equally fundamental that make the portrait a masterpiece.

Through all her vicissitudes of fortune, Rajlakshmi has retained the freshness and ardour of her early love for Shrikanta, and when she meets him, after years of wandering, in a musical soiree and woos him with her musical gift, she has the most thrilling experience of her life. But she does not want to keep him by her side. Possibly she feels that as she is a fallen woman, a Baiji (a professional singer), association with her will degrade her beloved. When she meets him next, she nurses him with a devotion of which she alone is capable, but she is anxious to send him away, because as she has an adopted step-son in her house, the presence of Shrikanta will compromise her as a mother. There is a collision between the instinct of love and the instinct of maternal affection, although it is felt for a child not her own. Rajlakshmi is always aware of her attachment to Shrikanta, but the forces with which this love contends appear to be not less

powerful than it; this is the reason why love has to assert itself with a deadly suddenness, welling up, as it were, from the half-unconscious depths of the soul. She has asked Shrikanta, who has not fully recovered from illness, to go away from her house, with an insistence that borders on rudeness. But at night when she thinks Shrikanta is asleep, she enters his bed-room, feels his pulse and does many other things which shows that although a mother's prestige may have a temporary ascendancy, her love for Shrikanta has its citadel in the inmost recesses of the soul. "She who had come stealthily into my room", says Shrikanta, "went away stealthily, too, for although I was awake, I remained silent and did not try to prevent her, but she did not know how much of her soul was revealed before me in the lonely stillness of the night."

When after this Shrikanta meets Rajlakshmi again, he proposes marriage to another girl and a journey to Burma. As a well-wisher of Shrikanta Rajlakshmi professes great enthusiasm for the proposal of marriage, but the mere thought that he will belong to another woman proves disconcerting, and she completely breaks down. It is through such confusions and disguise that her deep-seated love expresses itself, revealing many a subtle trait in her character. Once, for example, she is entertaining a guest, who is a patron of her music, when suddenly Shrikanta appears on the scene. Rajlakshmi makes a show of indifference towards him, but this indifference is only a mask her passion assumes in order to awaken jealousy in Shrikanta's mind about the guest, for jealousy is the surest test of love. She not only loves Shrikanta but wants to be loved in return. But this

desire cannot be fully realised. She feels that her money is tainted money which Shrikanta cannot easily accept, and although she has not defiled her body in the way of an ordinary woman of the town, she has used it to fascinate others. She is certain that her love for Shrikanta is pure, but she cannot make the same claim on behalf of herself. Quoting her own words, we may say, "The hand that has forged documents cannot make a genuine deed of gift."

At the end of the second part, however, Shrikanta publicly accepts Rajlakshmi as his wife, the foster-child Banku is established separately with property and a wife, and one may feel that in the retirement of Gangamati where Rajlakshmi buys some lands and settles down with Shrikanta, the old scruples will not recur, and there will be no external barrier in the way of a perfect union. But here the old breach is only widened, because between Rajlakshmi and Shrikanta stands the age-old religion of the Hindus. Shrikanta, to whom Rajlakshmi was not married in accordance with Shastric rites, has no place in her religious life. Religion is not mere formalism with her; it is a part of her soul. Thus there is a ceaseless effort at the reconciliation of irreconcilables, in which the subtlest filaments of love are revealed. It is an agonising process in which there is no death, but there is the same conflict, the same wastage as in lofty tragedy.

Grihadaha (*The Wrecked Home*) is Sarat Chandra's most perfect achievement in fiction. It is said that Sarat Chandra himself considered it his greatest work. It is flawless in construction; in its style there is a unique combination of simplicity and

richness, and in its heroine Achala, there is an attempt at fathoming the mysterious depths of the human heart, at revealing the contradictions and intricacies of love, in which Sarat Chandra surpasses all his other endeavours and achievements. Grihadaha is one of the greatest novels of the world. It is the story of two friends Mahim and Suresh both of whom love Achala and to both of whom she is attached. Can a woman love two men at the same time? If so, does it not strike at the root of civilised society which, even when it tolerates divorce and polygamy, is based on the assumption of a wife's undivided fidelity to her husband? Can a human being be aware of the strongest passions stirring within his or her own soul? Or is it true that the ultimate mystery of the human soul is not only incommunicable but also un-understandable. These are the questions suggested by Achala whose house is burnt by an unknown hand but whose heart is wrecked by a fundamental perplexity of which she is only dimly aware. Achala is betrothed to Mahim who is staid, imperturbable and uncommunicative. Before the marriage takes place, she is met by her lover's friend Suresh who is impulsive, voluble and reckless, in every way a foil to Mahim. Suresh falls madly in love with her, and his wooing, although it involves treachery to a friend, is like a tempest that sweeps everything before it. Achala is repelled by this disloyalty to Mahim as also by the savagery of his courtship, but she is overwhelmed by the elemental energy of a passion that is careless of all other considerations and reckless of consequence. The marriage with Mahim is cancelled by Achala's father who has an eye on Suresh's wealth, but ultimately it does take place as a result of her quiet but firm insist-

ence. Suresh intrudes again into Achala's life and finds that she is unhappy in Mahim's village home. Then begins a drama of attraction and repulsion, in course of which Suresh perpetrates many indiscretions none of which can be forgiven. He enters her room at night when she is sleeping on a sofa beside her ailing husband; he abducts her when she is journeying with her husband; he rapes her when he gets an opportunity of sharing her bedroom.

Achala tries to persuade herself that she has never loved this wild gallant who forces his way into her life and destroys her happiness. But is this true? When on a wintry day she wakes to find that Suresh has entered her room at night and covered her body with warm clothing, she is put out by the intruder's indiscretion, but she cannot be totally angry with him, because she feels that this act of shamelessness has been inspired by the man's unremitting anxiety to minister to her comfort. Banking on a temporary outburst of anger from her against her husband, Suresh thinks that if he can only snatch her away, he will have her for ever, and he abducts her in a daring manner when the three are travelling to Jubbulpur. Achala is horrified at this act of treachery, and her mind revolts against the traitor. But although Suresh asks her to go back to her peaceful domestic life and rails against her and her father, she cannot abandon him. It is, indeed, true that Suresh falls mortally ill at this critical moment, but what makes her cling to him is not mere pity for him in his illness but also a desire to respond to his deep and reckless love for her, "love which has no caste or religion, which is unrestrained by rational considerations of good and evil". She passes herself off as Suresh's wife and

nurses him back to health. But her heart yearns for her husband Mahim, and she keeps Suresh at a distance; whenever she looks at him, her mind is filled with amazement and revulsion at the enormity of his crime. One night she is compelled, in obedience to a sense of fictitious propriety, to share Suresh's bed. The experience is revolting; she feels that the false name of a wife she has worn for some time is pressing her towards an unfathomable pit of darkness, and when she awakes in the morning, tears trickle down her pale cheeks as water courses down the side of a dark mountain. What is it that really makes her go inside Suresh's bedroom? Does she yield only to a fiction or is the fiction just a mask behind which there is a deep-seated attraction, not merely sentimental but also biological, for the man who covets her body above everything else? Is it a rape or a surrender? Here we seem to touch the last maze in a labyrinth in which the romance of love is complicated by the passion of sex. The novelist who is a creator and not a theorist gives a suggestive analysis but does not point to any definite conclusion. This is what is appropriate to the relation existing between Suresh and Achala. Behind the strong hatred and repulsion, there is in Achala's heart a subterranean longing to respond, which may have weakened her resistance. Achala only half-understands the forces that torture her soul. When one thinks of her, the problems of women like Rama and Rajlakshmi appear to be relatively simple. In them the emotion of love is opposed either by some external force or some other emotion. Achala's love is subject to an inherent contradiction. She is in the grip of a duality that is a part of the riddle of life.

Achala's behaviour in the last scene is very characteristic. Suresh is dead. During his life she passed herself off in the society of Dehri under the false description of Suresh's wife. When on the cremation ground old Ram Babu, who loves her dearly and for whom, most of all, the falsehood could not be set right, asks her to perform the last rites of a wife and start the burning, Achala steadily refuses. If there is a future existence after death, she will not imperil its prospects for the man who blasted his life for her. She could not accept him during his life, but she cannot harm him in death.

CHAPTER V

PROBLEMS OF LIFE AND LOVE

I

WHEN Sarat Chandra wrote *Pather Dabi* (*The Right of the Road*) and *Shesh Prashna* (*The Ultimate Question*), readers were taken aback by the novelty of both matter and manner. It seemed that Sarat Chandra had ceased to be a story-teller, revealing character through action, and turned a controversialist and a propagandist, absorbed primarily in problems and discussions. He appeared to have thrown art for art's sake to the winds out of deference to his growing interest in the propagation of ideas. Amongst those who expressed their disapproval of the change was Rabindra Nath Tagore, who, however, admitted that *Pather Dabi*, which would have had little value if written as an essay, would not cease to interest readers as an exciting novel.

Sarat Chandra did not deny that there was a change; only he deferred to the criticism that it was necessarily a change for the worse. The believer in art for art's sake says that art aims at giving pleasure to the mind, but the mind is not the same everywhere; one man's mind is not like another man's, and the same man's mind changes from time to time. Bankim Chandra was a story-teller when he wrote his earlier novels, but in *Anandamath*, *Debichaudhurani* and *Sitaram*, he was interested less in his stories than in the presentation of ideas. And Sarat Chandra reminded Rabindra Nath Tagore that in his own novel

Gora, there is as much of discussion as of story. Art aims at the revelation of the inner spirit of man. This inner spirit, Sarat Chandra contended, is not cramped by the superimposition of intellectual discussion; rather man's thinking only illuminates man's soul. He admitted that the novel of discussion should conform to the fundamental principles of art, but he denied that such fundamental principles were immutably fixed; rather as these depended on the writer's intelligence, experience and aesthetic sensibility, they must be dynamic truths which continue to be realised from one age to another, and if a story is to be told, it does not mean that the narrator should banish his power of intellection.

To the objection that art should not deal with problems, Sarat Chandra had yet another answer. His view was that every novel must have its distinctive problem of plot besides a number of other problems—emotional, social and intellectual. The important thing for consideration is not the existence of the problem but the way in which it is presented. Sarat Chandra said that the problem must be faced openly and squarely and not through easy shortcuts. He objected to the manner in which the conjugal problem of Madhusudan and Kumu in Rabinda Nath's novel is solved by the advent of a lady doctor who declares that Kumu is an expectant mother and also to the way in which Jaladhar Sen solves a complicated problem in one of his novels by introducing a cobra who bites a man dead.

What is meant by facing the problem openly and squarely in a novel? Or, in other words, what is the test to which propaganda in literature should be put and how does discussion in a work of art differ from

discussion in an essay? Sarat Chandra claimed that he was a story-teller first and last and that although he had introduced discussion of problems, he had not suggested any solution, for the solution of problems belongs to the reformer's province, not to the novelist's. Whatever importance we may attach to discussion or propaganda in literature, one thing is beyond doubt. The new literature of discussion must observe an old law of art. The enquiry into problems must be inseparable from the creation of character; ideas must not be cold dogma but must put on hands and feet and become live human beings. The characters in a novel or a drama cannot be mere mouthpieces of certain doctrines; their actions must reflect the ideas their creator wants to propagate. It has to be considered how far *Pather Dabi* and *Shesh Prashna* satisfy these tests, how far propaganda has been made an organic part of the creation of character.

II

The title *Pather Dabi—The Right of the Road*—has an importance all its own. It sums up what may be called Sarat Chandra's philosophy of life. He feels that in the journey of life every one has certain inherent rights and privileges and claims which are not only large but also sacred; in other words, every man has the right to live as he likes. Foreign domination deprives a man of those rights which belong to the traveller if he has to move freely in the highway of life. That is what makes Sarat Chandra a political revolutionary. This, again, is the keynote of his thoughts about women. A religion that does not know

of love and pity and a society that is unforgiving deny the Indian woman certain fundamental privileges, and in his marvellous analysis of women's hearts, he is impelled chiefly by a desire to respect the instincts that clamour for gratification there. Even when, as in *Achala*, the pressure of external society is indirect and accidental, the emotion of love is so extremely complex that it cannot accommodate itself to social conventions which do not understand the subtleties of a woman's heart. Here, too, the author is inspired by a sympathetic considerateness towards the hidden intricacies of love, which are irrational but ineradicable and human. As a philosophy, this is extremely controversial, but this explains his attitude to life, particularly the emphasis he puts on women's rights and privileges and the wrongs they suffer in a man-made society. ✓ The hero of *Pather Dabi* is an Indian revolutionary, busy spreading a network of secret societies in Burma, Singapore, Penang, Sourabaya and other countries and islands in Eastern Asia, because women in these places are free, and they alone can help him in his mission. Although the argument is palpably absurd, it enables us to understand the author and his absorbing interest in women's problems and their emotional complexes.

III

Pather Dabi is a problem novel; it discusses the ideology of terrorism. Most people consider it a propaganda for securing independence for India by violent means. Although the plea for terrorism has never been more powerfully expressed than in this

novel, it must be remembered that the case against terrorism is pleaded here with extraordinary vigour through the lips of a Christian girl who is suffocated by the asphyxiating fumes of a movement that works in secret and makes assassins of patriots. The discussion never degenerates into cold propaganda, a large part of the charm of the novel consisting in the antiphonal alternation of Sabyasachi's passionate outburst in favour of terrorism and Bharati's equally passionate condemnation of it. Sabyasachi, the leader of a vast organisation in which his word is law, is imbued with the ideal of violence, and he expresses his point of view with obvious exaggeration. He does not argue it like a logician; he feels it like a partisan, for it is a part of his innermost being. For the sake of his ideal he is ready to sacrifice all other desirable things—peace, happiness and love. Not that he has not a sense of larger values, but for the sake of the independence of India, which, he believes, can be secured only by violent means, he is ready to waive every other consideration, to immolate all other ideals. It is this passionate conviction that easily lends itself to exaggeration, which makes the propagandist a warm-hearted human being. From the artistic point of view, this extreme simplicity is the defect as well as the merit of the portraiture. Sabyasachi is a romantic idealist in whom we miss the complexity and the delicate refinement we find in the hero of Gopal Halder's *Ekada*, who is alive as much to the fascination of terrorism as to its incompleteness and futility. But everything Sabyasachi says or does has the stamp of vitality, because he lives the philosophy he preaches. It is in this way alone that romantic portraiture can be real.

In course of his wanderings Sabyasachi meets Bharati, a Bengali Hindu girl brought up as a Christian in an Anglicised home, who becomes the secretary of Pather Dabi, his society in Burma. Bharati is in love with Apurba, an impressionable but essentially weak-minded young man who is made to enlist as a member. Although Bharati is the secretary of Pather Dabi, her expansive heart is cramped within the narrow confines of an exclusive ideal, and her humanity revolts against its creed of violence. Against Sabyasachi's vigorous pleading she protests with forceful eloquence, "I will not certainly admit that there is no other path but this, that man's search for salvation has reached its end here. I can never accept as final truth the theory that the path of one man's good is through another man's evil. No, I will not accept it even from you." The turn in the tide of events more than justifies her doubts. The Police get scent of the secret society, and Apurba makes a confession that leads to a temporary dissolution. The Executive Committee of the society pass the sentence of death on Apurba. The claims (*Dabi*) of Bharati's personal life run counter to the necessities and rights (*Dabi*) of the society. Sabyasachi, who has the power to overrule all decisions of the Executive Committee, grants Apurba his pardon.

Although Sabyasachi has throttled every emotion except violent patriotism, we get a fleeting glimpse of his personal life, too. The President of the society Sumitra, whose father was a Bengali and mother a Jewess, is frantically devoted to him, not only as a follower to a leader but also as a woman to her beloved. She is a strong-minded woman who can control her emotion, but she is bewildered by the

indifference of Sabyasachi who meets her claims with enigmatic silence. The last scene of the novel is written with great power and charm and a rare symbolic suggestiveness. The activities of the society are, for the moment, suspended, and the party itself is half in ruins. Sabyasachi, whose movements are mysterious and about whom nobody has the right to ask a question, leaves all his old friends in Burma on a night of storm and rain. The followers think of detaining him but do not dare press the suggestion. There is no cessation of the rain, the storm is unremitting in its fury, the darkness is almost palpable, and the road is slippery. But Sabyasachi is undeterred; he leaves his more argumentative comrades and takes as his companion Hira Singh who does not speak except in monosyllables, who has no friend or enemy, who is above joy or sorrow, insult and shame, whose life has only one mission—silent, unquestioning obedience to the chief. Sumitra is left behind, moping in deep agony as a comrade who has outlived her usefulness and as a sweetheart who has failed to evoke a response. The storm and fury outside the room in which Sabyasachi bids them adieu may be symbolic of the storm and fury inside it. The forces of nature, which, on this night, seem to have nothing but terror for the man who stirs outside, remind one of the violent revolutionary's path which is strewn with dangers, seen and unseen. And in the storm and the rain, Sumitra may have found luridly appropriate imagery of her own soul—its terrible agony and its mysterious strength.

It has been pointed out already that it is a mistake to look upon *Pather Dabi* as a mere propaganda for terrorism. As a work of art, it has many qualities

and many flaws. Reference has been made to the extreme simplicity of the hero's character, which is at the same time a defect and a virtue. Amongst the many merits of the novel are the realistic pictures of life amongst labourers in factories and glimpses of the squalor and misery in the midst of which the terrorist is condemned to pass his days and to which his passionate idealism provides such a lurid contrast. Another attractive feature is the impression of largeness produced by the co-operation of men and women drawn from different castes, from different provinces and with different temperaments, making a large army of which Sabyasachi is the Commander-in-Chief. The vastness of this army is an indication not only of the vastness of India but also of the vastness of Sabyasachi's efforts. Sumitra, Bharati, Apurba and Hira Singh have already been spoken of. There is Krishna Iyer, a South Indian Barrister, who speaks in short, suggestive, often caustic sentences, there is Brajendra, a ferocious barbarian from Chittagong, there is Ramdas Taloarkar, the Marathi Brahmin, who obeys and suffers without a wince, and there are references to Nilkanta Joshi, Ahmed Durrani, Mathura Dube, Mahatap and Suryya Singh. There is also the unforgettable Shashi, a drunkard and a poet, whom it is easy to deceive but who will never disclose any secret confided to him by the leader. He brings comic relief to the story of passion and violence, but as a poet he represents the final values at which Sabyasachi's endeavours are directed. "You are a poet," says the terrorist leader, "and you are the country's great artist; don't forget for a moment that you are loftier than politics. It is you who represent the country at her best. You alone will

determine her true worth. A day will certainly dawn when these questions of freedom and bondage are bound to be solved; on that day the story of its suffering and poverty will fade into a legend, but who will assess the price of your work? It is you alone who will gather, as in a garland, the country's scattered thoughts and emotions."

The principal defect of this novel is the touch of melodrama which infects even its realistic pictures and half spoils it as a story of the Indian revolutionary movement. Sabyasachi's activities seem to be shrouded in mystery; he passes from one thrilling adventure to another, but the reader and his comrades are given only a faint glimmer of what he plans or executes. The references to his works, to what he will do with the sepoys off Bhamo or what Mahatap and Suryya Singh did or how Nilkanta Joshi met his death are extremely vague and have a crude suggestiveness. Another and an equally fundamental defect is that not only is Sumitra, the President of the society, half a Jewess with little or no connexion with India but the hero himself is totally cut off from the land for whose independence he is fighting with unremitting vigour. It is difficult to see how the labyrinthine conspiracies started in China, Singapore, Penang and other places outside India will lead to the achievement of freedom in India. Once he refers to Sun-yat-sen as a comrade, but what connexion the Chinese leader can have with the freedom movement in India remains a mystery. It is, indeed, true that some revolutionaries like Sun-yat-sen carried on their revolutionary activities from exile, but such activities must have their roots in the native land. This is more than can be said of Sabyasachi who is voluble about

his ideology but strangely reticent about his actions, past, present and future. The novelist confines himself to narrating a few startling escapades and giving hints about more startling adventures. But these alone cannot make a story convincing either as a narrative or as a work of art. Sabyasachi is vividly drawn as a warm-hearted idealist, but in the absence of more detailed pictures of his activities, the reader cannot but feel that he is a magnificent torso of a man rather than a full-length portrait.

IV

Although *Pather Dabi* is professedly a novel of the Indian revolutionary movement, it has many other aspects which are equally significant, if not equally prominent. Apurba is an orthodox Hindu, and one of the principles of Sabyasachi's society is that individual tastes should be respected as sacred. But in far away Burma Apurba's Brahmin cook is nursed by the Christian girl Bharati who gives him food and drink during a mortal illness, and the Christian girl is deeply in love with Apurba who, too, is attracted towards her. Can there be a reconciliation between Apurba's religious faith to which he is firmly attached and the emotion which draws him towards a girl to whom he cannot be united if his orthodoxy has to be maintained? The novel ends before this problem has solved itself; we cannot say if Apurba will be able to free himself from the shackles of orthodoxy and accept the girl who loves him in every fibre of her being. The novelist does not comment openly on the limitations imposed by religion, contenting himself with glancing at the hollowness of untouchability

which is difficult to maintain in a distant land, but behind the obvious jests there seems to be an under-current of criticism of the implications of orthodoxy when it opposes the impulses of the heart. But is Apurba's orthodoxy mere external formalism? Or, is it not rather a religion of the heart, a discipline he seems to accept as a part of spiritual well-being? If he has to abandon this religion only because he has been attracted towards a girl that does not profess it, are we to assume that the author's intention is to scorn discipline and glorify a life of impulse? Such an assumption, again, is difficult to make in view of creations like Ghanashyam (*Swami*), Sunanda (*Shrikanta* Part Three) and Bipradas who are truly heroic, but whose nobility and strength of character are a part of their orthodoxy.

This problem may be looked at from yet another point of view. Sabyasachi holds out a plea that the individual must have his rights, that in the journey of life his freedom should be subject to no restraint. But in his own society the members have very little independence, for two of its fundamental laws are that they must not discuss the leader's conduct behind his back and that any attempt at rebellion against him is punishable by death. The revolutionary, who claims the right to rebel against the Government but finds it difficult to concede the right of criticism to his own followers, is thus involved in a contradiction of which he is but vaguely aware. When, on his first introduction to the society, Apurba points out that if every member begins to work according to his own convictions, it might lead to chaos, Sabyasachi stops him short by retorting that there must be some difference between whims and convictions, but with

an intellectual timidity that is strangely incompatible with his boldness in action and speculation, he fails to show where whims end and convictions begin. The problem which is, indeed, deeper than mere individual delinquency, may be thus presented: Is life to be guided by standards that are unchanging, or do the standards also vary from man to man or from age to age? Sabyasachi is a criminal not only in the eye of the law of British India but also from the point of view of accepted morality, because his mission is a mission of hatred, and he wants to wade through bloodshed to his goal of the independence of India. What, it may be asked, is the moral justification of this hero who does evil so that good may come out of it? He defends himself by enunciating a philosophy of change, saying that truth itself, like all other things, has growth and decay and that an action or thought which is wrong for one age may be right for another, right and wrong, on this view, being man's creations rather than immutable principles. To Bharati he says, "You speak of fundamental, final principles; these meaningless, futile words are of great value to you. In fact, there is scarcely any other magic spell equally powerful for the deception of fools. Do you not think that falsehood is made by man whereas truth is eternal and independent of human agency? Well, it is a lie; like falsehood, truth itself is being daily created by man. It is not eternal, for it grows and dies even like falsehood." But is this defence to be accepted as final? This is the fundamental philosophical problem to which all Sarat Chandra's intellectual and emotional questionings lead him, and he makes it the central theme of *Shesh Prashna* or *The Ultimate Question*.

V

Before considering the merit of *Shesh Prashna* as a novel the reader should fix his attention on the position it occupies in the history of Sarat Chandra's creative efforts. Chronologically, it is one of the latest of his products; but it is his *ultimate* work from a more fundamental point of view. Sarat Chandra's absorbing preoccupation is with the right of the road for women whose impulses are held in check by conventional morality which cannot understand and will not forgive. One reason why the pillars of society cannot appreciate the sacredness of human emotion is that tradition and convention are fixed whereas human impulses are dynamic; not only do they vary from one man or one woman to another but even in the same heart one impulse leads to another, and not unoften contradictory impulses jostle one another at the same moment. Indeed, impulses have such a restless energy that man's reason cannot cope with them; it only exercises a mechanical control over forces to which it is very often openly hostile. It is the function of reason to stratify, to determine immutable forms and standards, but the impulses always rebel against this attempt of an alien power to fix, codify and restrain them. Sarat Chandra's interest in this aspect of human life led him naturally to the metaphysical problem—Which is right? Impulse or reason? The principle of rest or the principle of movement?

The problem is as ancient as Heraclitus; it is as modern as Bergson. To Sarat Chandra it occurred primarily as a human conflict and secondarily as a philosophical problem. A creative artist, he became

impressed in his own way by the disharmony between the will that impels and the intellect that controls, and he envisages this disharmony most prominently in *Shesh Prashna*, which, in technique, is different from his earlier novels but completes the emotional and intellectual quest which is the most distinguishing feature of them all. His earliest heroines Aparna, Anupama and Surama, although only slightly sketched, are tortured by the conflict between reason and impulse, which becomes tenser and tenser as we proceed from Madhabi and Parbati to Rajlakshmi and Shodashi and from Rajlakshmi and Shodashi to Achala, his greatest creation, who symbolises the tragic irrationality lying at the root of human instinct. In *Shesh Prashna*, Sarat Chandra attacks the problem more directly and thoroughly by drawing a heroine who not only feels and acts but enunciates a philosophy that glorifies impulse and change and exposes the limitations of reason and the hollowness of form and convention. Ideologically, *Shesh Prashna*, which poses the *ultimate question*, represents the last point in his literary career; it is the finale in a creative adventuring which started with *Anupamar Prem* (*Anupama's Love*), *Mandir* (*The Temple*) and *Alo-O-Chaya* (*Light and Shade*). In his latest (unfinished) novel *Shesher Parichaya* (*The Final Revelation*), he returns to the old theme, projecting the old problem in the life of a woman who loves her husband but has had a temporary lapse.

Although Sarat Chandra is an artist rather than a philosopher, *Shesh Prashna* is a philosophical novel, its heroine Kamal being the exponent of a *weltanschauung*. She has an intriguing past, being the daughter of a high caste Hindu widow living in con-

cubinage with a European Tea planter of Assam. She was married to an Assamese Christian but soon becomes a widow. When the story begins, she is at Agra, the wife by *Shaiba* rite, which has no legal validity, of a former Professor who lost his job on account of drunkenness. Kamal seems to be widely read and has matchless powers of argumentation which she applies to the elaboration of a philosophy of change. She upholds movement against rest, spirit against matter, impulse against reason, the pleasure of the moment against the bliss of eternity. For her the truth of life consists in its fugitive joys, in the rhythm of movement; there is nothing permanent in life, she thinks, except the impermanent moments which vanish into thin air as soon as we begin to bind them into a unity. Life is an impalpable essence which is passing through a constant flux, and forms are the dearest of dead wood. Happiness, on this view, consists in the excesses and wastages committed by impulse, and reason which checks superabundance and imposes codes of duty is Life's tyrant. Libertinism may be a vice, but chastity is not a virtue, if it collides with the desires of the heart.

There are many readers who hold that Sarat Chandra advocates through Kamal ideas which have become old-fashioned or that he has only imperfect acquaintance with the ideas he wants to present. Such criticisms are beside the point, because the novel expresses in art form the eternal conflict and incompatibility between reason and impulse, and even if it is true that the author does not make any contribution ideologically or that Kamal commits metaphysical howlers as soon as she goes into detail, it does not detract from the artistic value of the portrait any more

than the dramatic significance of *Ghosts* can be obscured by the latest medical statistics. A more apposite criticism, trenchantly expressed by an eminent critic, is the view that Kamal is only the mouthpiece of certain doctrines and not an artistic creation, that she is more of a whistling engine than a living human being.

In judging *Shesh Prashna*, the reader should never forget that it is a problem novel, and that it must have less of plot and more of discussion and dialogue than an ordinary story. But it has to be seen whether the discussions are enlivened by the warm, human personalities of the characters taking part in them or whether they are cold doctrines divorced from emotion and action. Although the delineation of Kamal has its flaws, it cannot be said that she is a mere engine of propaganda without any life. Indeed, she produces an impression of vitality in a variety of ways, through her telling phrases, through the force of her convictions and last but not least, through her actions. She lives her philosophy which, in argument, is expressed more through picturesque images than through ratiocination. She takes up a militant attitude towards all that tends to bind human impulses,—memories of the past, ancient ideals and form and convention. The wonderful Tajmahal is for her a mere work of art whose beauty has little to do with the romantic dream poets and idealists associate with it. The monastic ideal of *Brahmacharya* is repugnant to her tastes, and when she hears of a Hindu widow's self-sacrifice, she feels nothing but contempt and disgust. Her complaint is not so much against the husband who deserts her as against Ashu Babu whom she respects as a man but

who has atrophied his heart by clinging to the memory of a dead wife.

Kamal's activities bear the same testimony. When she marries her second husband Shibnath, people warn her that the ceremony is a mockery without any legal validity. She who knows that in affairs of the heart judgment is always *ex parte* is at the same time amused and irritated. Can one who is a champion of impulse try to bind down a husband when his affection for her has fled? Shibnath and Kamal meet at Agra the elderly widower Ashu Babu, his daughter Manorama, Ajit who is affianced to her and many other persons. As Shibnath and Manorama are very soon attracted to each other, Kamal's philosophy is put to its crucial test—the central theme of the novel—and she passes through it with perfect equanimity. She does not stop to consider whether she is still attached to him or how she will be affected by the desertion; for her it is enough that Shibnath has ceased to love her, and she does not feel the least curiosity about his new entanglement. Those who glibly declare that this problem novel is without a plot do not realise how this estrangement from Shibnath and its effect on her have been shown through gradual stages reaching their climax in the marriage of Shibnath and Manorama in which she does not display a scrap of interest. With his fondness for coincidence, Sarat Chandra imagines that Ajit, who has been jilted by Manorama, falls in love with Kamal. Kamal accepts him with a feeling of resigned joy which suggests that her philosophy of flux has gone through some modification. To Ajit with whom she casts her lot she says, "Do bind me with your weaknesses. I do not think that I shall be

cruel enough to abandon a man like you, so inexperienced and so tender. I am an atheist; but if I believed in God, I would have prayed to Him that I might be allowed to die after I have been able to save you from all the shafts the world might hurl against you". Such a confession in which we hear of God, of bondage and of the future shows that she is not an engine which is propelled by some external force and works automatically but a living human being who can respond to and learn from experience.

Two other characters in the book deserve special mention. These are the terrorist Rajen and Ashu Babu who are, each in his own way, foils to Kamal. The terrorist Rajen does not accept Kamal's advances of friendship, shows no interest in her philosophical speculations which he passes by with a sneer and seems to be impervious to womanly charm. For him intellectual subtlety is an idle foppery he has not the time to indulge in, and with his faith in organised deeds, he has no respect for honest differences of opinion that encourage subtlety of thought but hamper action. He seems to be an intruder into the novel of domestic love and friendship, and we get only a fragmentary picture of his character. But he is the one man on whom Kamal fails to make an impression and to whom she acknowledges her inferiority. With his silence, his indifference to the delicate intricacies of love and his faith in an ideal that demands unquestioning obedience and is realised only in action, he is a refreshing contrast to Kamal who is a voluble champion of undisciplined, restless impulse, who is ceaselessly experimenting in love and who thinks and argues with subtlety but can act only sporadically.

PROBLEMS OF LIFE AND LOVE

Ashu Babu occupies a much larger place in the novel than Rajen and is, indeed, the second most important character in it. He is a foil to Kamal, because he believes in the sacredness of old ties, in ancient ideals of morality and religion, in eternal truths, in everything, in short, which Kamal holds in scorn. He is an old man, physically immobile, with his career behind him. His actions, therefore, are few, but his tolerance is large and his laughter immense. Although he has not Kamal's energy and vigour and cannot thus be regarded as an adequate contrast to her, he understands everything and everybody and has a sunny smile which spreads around the book like an atmosphere and is in part an answer to the ultimate question which is its central theme. He is riddled by Kamal with sarcastic comments for his faith in what she regards as effete ideals and for the way he treasures the memory of his dead wife, but he has tolerance for Kamal's opinions which he cannot accept and also affection for Kamal as a woman young enough to be his daughter. It is possible that the chastened manner in which Kamal speaks at the closing stages of the story is partly due to the sobering influence of Ashu Babu's ideas and personality.

Although *Shesh Prashna* is a novel experiment in fiction, it has many flaws, some of them vital. The episode of Nilima, a widow who passes her days in self-effacing service for others and suddenly develops a passion for Ashu Babu, is a digression that is ineffective both as art and as propaganda. The stories of the Professors at Agra are elaborated unnecessarily, and not one of them is a convincing portrait. Whenever Kamal is absent, the story flags.

It has already been suggested that even Ashu Babu, in spite of his large-hearted tolerance and benevolent smile, is a weak contrast to the vivacious Kamal. A more serious flaw is the representation of the Ajit-Kamal episode. Kamal does not make advances to Ajit with the fiery energy that may be expected from her. This new love seems at first to be a freak and not a vital impulse, and when she finally accepts Ajit, she appears to be too tired even to think; she is unconscious of the change that has come over her, which is surprising in a woman with such remarkable agility of intellect. It has been hinted that Kamal has learnt from experience the folly of trusting to mere instinct and that this change in her attitude is reflected in the manner in which she accepts Ajit as her mate. Although such a view is admissible and is suggested by the incidents narrated, the change in Kamal's philosophy and temperament is not clearly envisaged, and the gradual stages through which the transformation takes place are not revealed.

The most fundamental defect of the novel is the conception of the character of Shibnath. Kamal is united to him on the basis, not of a rigid ceremony, but of momentary, impulsive attraction. If this attraction ceases, she must, in consonance with her philosophy, part from him without a pang of regret. When Shibnath is drawn towards Manorama and leaves Kamal, Kamal takes the desertion with perfect composure. But Sarat Chandra loads the dice or, in Shavian phraseology, packs the cards in her favour by portraying Shibnath as a heartless scoundrel whom any wife would be glad to get rid of. By the time Shibnath is attracted towards Manorama, Kamal seems to have outgrown her fascination for

him and begun to hate him for his meanness. Kamal's philosophy would have been put to a proper test if, when Shibnath has left her, she could still have retained some affection or respect for him. Then there would have been an agonised conflict between her heart's affections which would have clung to Shibnath and her intellectual convictions which would have persuaded her to part from him. As it is, the parting seems to have been effected without difficulty, and Kamal's philosophy comes off without any serious test. In spite of these defects, both *Pather Debi* and *She-h Prashna* are noteworthy efforts in a new form of fiction, and Sabyasachi, Bharati and Kamal, not to speak of minor figures like Hira Singh and Rajen, are remarkable creations.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION.

I

The most remarkable qualities of Sarat Chandra's art are directness and a sense of intimacy. His descriptions of rural life, of human joy and suffering appear to have been drawn from first-hand knowledge. He matriculated from the T. N. J. School, Bhagalpur but graduated at the larger University of experience. It is because he seems to narrate the things he saw with his own eyes and to depict the men and women he met in course of his daily commerce with the world that his portraiture is both vigorous and vivid. A notable feature of his art is seen in the command of details and in the exploration of unsuspected possibilities in things apparently negligible or absurd. Sarat Chandra is well-known for his delineation of comic characters as well as for his insight into the ecstasies of emotion, and in both these branches his success is due primarily to his capacity for bringing out the significance of minor incidents, allusions and phrases. When travelling to Burma Shrikanta meets on board the steamer a man who introduces himself as the celebrated Nanda Mistri (mechanic) of Rangoon. At Rangoon he comes across a man named Haripada Mistri who is very sensitive about the prestige of his profession and intolerant of men like Nanda whom he looks upon as mere impostors.

'I asked him, "Could you, sir, tell me the way

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leading to Nanda Mistri's house?" The man stopped and answered, "Which Nanda do you mean? Do you seek Nanda Pagree of the Rebate Room?"

The point of the joke lies in Haripada's not conceding Nanda the title of a Mistri or a mechanic and in the phrase "Rebate Room". Ordinarily the work of the Rebate Room is left to untrained coolies, and the suggestion that Nanda belongs to that place shows the bitter contempt an expert Mistri has for one whom he considers a pretender. The descriptions of the journey to Rangoon and of the theatre and the Yatra witnessed by Shrikanta are justly famous for their vividness, but they are too long to quote. There, too, the reader discovers the same emphasis on details, the same power of evoking the suggestiveness of trivialities.

A simpler but equally effective instance may be quoted from *Ramer Sumati* (*Ram Turns A Good Boy*). Ram has learnt at school that the shade of the mighty *Asath* tree is very pleasant, and he thinks of planting this tree somewhere in the yard of his house. His sister-in-law asks him, smiling, "What will you do with an *Asath* tree in the middle of the yard?" Ram answers in amazement, "Good Heavens, *Bowdidi* (sister-in-law)! Just imagine what a nice cool shade we shall have here. And from this small twig which you see here, when it grows larger—ho, Gobinda, don't point at it with your finger—I shall hang a cradle for Gobinda. Bhola, the fence must be raised high or Kali (the family cow) will eat it off." The proposal to plant a large *Asath* tree inside the yard of a house is fantastic to the point of absurdity, and Ram takes a big plant that will wither away in a day or two, but he is absorbed in

this adventure, paying attention to minute details and providing against all possible contingencies. He thinks of hanging a cradle for his young nephew Gobinda who is just five years old, but does not stop to consider that by the time the plant grows into a tree (if it does grow at all) Gobinda will be too old to swing in a cradle. But this episode, palpably egregious as it is, throws a flood of light on Ram's character—his childlike credulity, his power of concentration, his restless energy, his attention to small points and his blindness to reality. A very interesting trifle that is put in a parenthesis and adds to the vividness of the portraiture is Ram's warning to Gobinda that he must not point at the twig with his finger, for it is a well-known superstition amongst children and ignorant people that as soon as a growing thing is thus pointed at, it begins to decay.

This love for detail is seen not only in the delineation of humorous characters but also in the analysis of the delicate shades of emotion. Sarat Chandra reveals the intricate workings of the human heart, which are manifested in an unsuspected manner, through a number of incidents apparently so slight as to escape notice. Indeed, the mystery of love would not have been so vividly limned if the representation had been less minute.

A passage or two from any novel will show this characteristic feature of Sarat Chandra's art which is found in all his works. Shrikanta has intruded into the house of Rajlakshmi when she is entertaining a rich Zemindar with her music. Shrikanta professes absolute indifference about the guest, which alarms Rajlakshmi who wants to arouse jealousy in Shrikanta, for there can be no jealousy where there is no

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love. She offers Shrikanta a cold reception and suggests that as the wealthy guest is occupying the room in the upper storey, previously assigned to Shrikanta, he will have to be accommodated downstairs and seems to be directing the servants accordingly. But when Shrikanta actually retires, he finds that Rajlakshmi has made arrangements for him in her own room and that she herself has moved elsewhere. "On a big bed-stead," says Shrikanta, "a princely bed had been spread on a thick mattress. Near the pillow on a small table a lamp was burning from a stand. On one side there were some Bengali books, and on the other there were *Bel* flowers in a pot. The very first glance made me realise that not one of these things was the work of servants; she who loved deeply had done everything with her own hand. I seemed to feel the touch of Rajlakshmi's hand even in the bed-spread she must have herself placed there." It is in this way that deep-seated love manifests itself from behind a mask of coldness. Shrikanta goes to Burma where he is taken seriously ill, and returns, after a long sojourn, to Calcutta. Although Rajlakshmi meets him here and hires a house where he is accommodated, she seems to receive him without warmth, but when he enters the room reserved for him, he has a revealing glimpse of Rajlakshmi's real feeling for him. "As I entered it," says he, "I felt that here was, indeed, a room really meant for me. Piyari (that is the name assumed by Rajlakshmi as a professional singer) had brought my books, and she had not even forgotten my hubble-bubble. At Patna I liked to look at a picture of the sunset, which had been purchased at a high price. It had been placed in her own bedroom,

but she had it removed from there into mine. Even that picture she had brought with her to Calcutta and then had it hung in the same way on a wall in this room. My writing materials, my cloth and even my red velvet slippers—all these things had been kept here with the same care as at Patna. At Patna I always reclined on an easy chair, but as possibly it could not be brought from there, a new easy chair of a similar shape had been purchased in Calcutta and placed in exactly the same manner near the window. Slowly I moved into this chair and lay down with eyes shut. I felt that in an ebbing current the murmur of the onrushing flood-tide was being heard near the mouth of the river."

II

It is the emphasis on details for which primarily Sarat Chandra is called a realist. Yet another reason is that he is inspired not so much by love for beauty as by a feeling of passionate revolt against social evils. In many of his novels, notably in the semi-autobiographical *Shrikanta*, there is vehement protest against what he calls loveless, pitiless society and religion; in those novels and stories where such protest is less open, it is incipient and is regarded by many as the keynote of his literary effort. But the hasty critic may easily be led to place too much stress on what is only one aspect of his genius. His writings are, indeed, inspired by a social consciousness, his technique is undoubtedly realistic, but the final effect produced by his work is largely a romantic effect. One may go further and say that writers like Sarat Chandra show that concepts such as realism and

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romanticism, though useful as guides to critical judgment and as descriptions of tendencies, are valueless when regarded as exclusive labels or as symbols finally summing up literary qualities or movements.

Sarat Chandra is a propagandist in aim and a realist in his method of representation or description, but he is a romantic in temperament. A realist like Ibsen or Zola or Shaw can create characters that have vitality, but the dominant impression left by the writings of these authors is of striking ideas whereas the charm of Sarat Chandra's novels, although they are imbued with the spirit of social revolt, is the charm of arresting personalities. It is the individual peculiarities in Rajlakshmi, Sabitri or Kiranmayee that absorb the author or the reader, and in Achala these peculiarities become so subtle that the social idea seems to be lost sight of altogether. Even when, as in *Pather Dabi* or *Shesh Prashna*, it is the idea and not the personality that is the main concern, the heroines have a romantic past, and *Pather Dabi* is full of references to thrilling adventures on sea and land. Indeed, many of the novels of Sarat Chandra draw the portraits of heroines—Parbati, Rama, Rajlakshmi and Sabita—who want to go back to the past but cannot, and the romantic fascination of early love or friendship is part of the art of a writer who is often presented as a mere realist. Sarat Chandra's thoughts and sympathies seem to have been awakened by social problems, and his observing eye loves to dwell on paltry details in the complex network of social relationships, but his imagination is spurred to activity by the mystery and strangeness in the primal recesses of women's hearts.

Apart from the revolutionary zeal which inspires Sarat Chandra and which is found amongst both realistic and romantic writers, his novels are romantic also because most of them portray wistful, unrealised longings. Even when, as in *Datta (The Betrothed)*, he does write of happy and successful love, he is more interested in analysing the subtleties of yearning in a heroine who cannot give adequate expression to her emotions. Another factor contributing to this romantic impression is the emphasis Sarat Chandra places on the merely sentimental side of love. Although not a conservative, he is a Puritan who generally dissociates sex from love. A Puritan need not necessarily be a romantic, but it is the peculiarity of Sarat Chandra's art that he abstains from portraying the stark realities involved in sexual relationships and represents love as a refined and delicate emotion, as a mere spiritual longing. It is only when he reveals the vulgarities of life on a truck in *Shrikanta* Part Three or in a factory, in *Pather Dabi* or in occasional episodes in *Chāritraheen* that we get a glimpse of the grosser side of sex. In *Grihadaha* alone, as pointed out in a previous chapter, Sarat Chandra overcomes this shyness and portrays love as complicated by sex, and there, too, the romantic impression of strangeness and mystery is only reinforced by the realistic portraiture, for the heroine yields partly to the pressure of circumstances, partly, perhaps, to the half-understood cravings of her own soul and then recoils from an experience that is not sanctioned by religion or morality and is incompatible with her love for Mahim, her husband. ✓

Yet another romantic feature of Sarat Chandra's art is the discovery of a deep connexion between

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natural forces and human feelings. Sarat Chandra is not a poet, and the references to Nature in his novels are only occasional, but in many places when his heroines pass through an emotional crisis, Nature plays an appropriate part in the human drama. When, at the beginning of the second part of *Shrikanta*, Shrikanta meets Rajlakshmi, she fears that he may misunderstand her relationship with a guest who is a patron of her music. Then as her fears are dispelled, she is confronted with a proposal of Shrikanta's marriage which, although she tries to encourage it, makes her heart sink. Shrikanta sees into the bottom of her heart and makes an open avowal of his determination not to get married so that he may belong for ever to Rajlakshmi. The effect of this avowal is thus vividly described by Shrikanta :

"For a moment our eyes met, and she immediately hid her face leaning on the pillow. Only her whole frame began to tremble and heave under the pressure of the tears that burst forth with irrepressible force.

I looked around. The whole house was sunk in deep slumber; not a soul stirred anywhere. Once alone it seemed that the deep dark night outside was witnessing with profound satisfaction the heart-rending struggle of emotions in Piyari Baiji, the professional singer, who had been a boon companion in many of its own revels."

The drama in Piyari's soul is minutely described, but it gains both in intensity and breadth when seen in relation to the mystery and darkness of the night.

In *Datta*, the inner drama is never so intense as in *Shrikanta* or *Grihadaha*, but even there in a moment of acute emotional crisis, the heroine finds a

strange response in the natural objects around her. Bijaya has to deal with the Satanic Rash Bihari who poses as her guardian and wants to make her his daughter-in-law. She can rely on old Dayal who is a sincere well-wisher and on Narandra Nath who should realise how deeply she is in love with him. But she comes to suspect that Narendra is being attracted towards Dayal's niece Nalini and that Dayal, her old friend, is encouraging it. One evening she finds Narendra and Nalini in close proximity, and she has no doubt that they will soon be man and wife. In deep chagrin she leaves Dayal's house, and when she comes out in the open, she finds her own misery thus reflected in Nature: "As Bijaya came out she found that there was not a streak of cloud in the sky; it was the ninth day after the new moon and the moon was just in front of her, shining with a fixed glare. It appeared to her that from the grass beneath her feet to everything else she could set her eyes on—the sky, the plains, the dark line of the forest of the village lying ahead of her, the river and the waters—all things were reeling under the silent moonlight. Nothing was related to or acquainted with anything else; it seemed that while they had been asleep in their separate worlds, they had been torn from their roots and cast at random here and there by some unknown hand. Now that the slumber was over, they were looking at one another in amazement, for everything was a stranger to everything else."

/ When Suresh and Achala remove to their new home, there is, on the first night, a terrific storm that prevents Ram Babu from returning to his own house, and Achala has to share Suresh's bed. Achala sur-

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renders herself to Suresh, and Nature with her fury supplies a suitable background to this act of shame. "The wild night outside began to rage as terribly as ever, flashes of lightning in the sky began repeatedly to tear the veil of darkness to tatters, as it were; the rains and the storm seemed to scatter the elements pell-mell with unabated energy, but compared with the ravages of the fury that coursed through the hearts of these two doomed mortals, blinded with passion and shame, the tumult of Nature appeared to be negligibly thin." When Suresh is dead, and Mahim is silent and cold, Achala faces a bleak future before her, and the desolation she finds within and without her is portrayed with the help of appropriate imagery culled from Nature: "There was no fear, no anxiety, nothing to be desired or even imagined, the horizon of the future spread itself out as a dreary expanse without colour, without shape, without movement or character; it was an absolute blank."

III

What, it may now be asked, is the final impression left by the works of this novelist whose attitude to life is that of a romantic but who is realistic in his observation and technique? The final impression is one of depth, detachment and variety. Sarat Chandra can analyse and portray stirring emotional conflict with a minuteness and sympathy rarely seen outside his work; he projects himself into his heroines, unfolding, bit by bit, the agonised drama he finds there. His portraiture is so detailed and his sympathy so deep that he seems to identify himself

with his heroines and feel their problems as they themselves feel them. This process of identification reaches its climax in *Grihadaha* (*The Wrecked Home*) in which the author seems to be in the same inexplicable perplexity as the heroine; it appears that Sarat Chandra only half-understands Achala, for the ultimate problem of existence is too subtle to be grasped and explained; the creator seems to be as much bewildered as the character he creates.

✓ Although Sarat Chandra merges himself in his creations and portrays the inner drama of reason and impulse with an intimacy and directness to which there are few parallels, he is also a humorous observer, surveying the many-coloured dome of life with aloofness. Being a romantic dreamer, he is absorbed in the strange workings of passion, but he is also a humorist who has a sunny, detached smile for the excesses inseparable from intense passion. He portrays Suresh in *Grihadaha* with deep sympathy, showing that although Suresh may be a traitor, and although he may have coveted another man's wife, there are in his love for Achala, a fearlessness and a self-sacrificing impetuosity before which we must all bow our heads. But he is keenly alive to the ridiculous side of Suresh's character, his prevarications and his eccentricities. Indeed, Sarat Chandra's insight into passion and his humour are so nearly allied that Suresh's character is all of a piece; his comic indiscretions are as much a part of his character as his passionate recklessness. ✓ It is only when, as in the portraiture of idealists like Bishweshwari and Ramesh in *Palli-Samaj* (*Rural Society*), Sarat Chandra's sense of humour deserts him that his characterisation appears to be stilted, artificial and one-sided.

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This mingling of absorption and detachment is seen also in his comic creations. He surveys them with the aloofness of the comedian, but he also identifies himself with them. That is what makes his portraiture so rich in detail, so vivid and direct. It has been suggested that in the eccentric Homeopath Priya Nath Sarat Chandra drew a portrait of himself. It is, indeed, true that he enters, with great gusto, the Homeopath's world of Hahnemann and Hering and "symptoms" and "remedies". This inwardness of portraiture is seen most prominently in these sketches of childhood, in Paresh's flair for bargaining and love for kites (*Datta*), in Ram's absorption in the two pet Rohit fishes Ganesh and Kartik (*Ramer Sumati*) as also in the delineation of peculiar idiosyncrasies of grown-up men and women, Kunja Bostam's fondness for his wife (*Pandit Mashai*), uncle Kailash's love for chess (*Chandra Nath*), Tagar's sensitiveness to the prestige of caste (*Shrikanta* Part Two) and Shibu Pandit's vanity about superior knowledge of the *Shastras* (*Shrikanta* Part Three). As has been said already, Sarat Chandra's villains are drawn from the outside, and with the exception of Rash Bihari in *Datta*, not one of them is a great creation, but even in his bitter satires there are glimpses of penetrating insight into character, the best example being found in the characterisation of Natun Da (*Shrikanta* Part One), who, after he has been saved from a watery grave, is anxious less about himself than about a missing pumpshoe.

If any philosophy of life is to be derived from Sarat Chandra's novels, it is a philosophy of tolerance based on sympathy and humorous detachment. Even when, as in *Pather Dabi* (*The Right of the Road*)

and *Shesh Prashna* (*The Ultimate Question*), Sarat Chandra appears to be a propagandist, he is anxious to throw light on the other side of the shield. Although Sarat Chandra is primarily a delineator of women, his philosophy of life is expressed most powerfully through two of his greatest male characters—Shrikanta and Jibananda (*Dena-Paona*). As pointed out previously, Shrikanta combines a lover's ardour with an ascetic's indifference, and in all his wanderings, maintains a spectator's independence of outlook. The statement that the libertine Jibananda expresses the author's philosophy of life seems at first sight to be quizzical, but Jibananda is, in some respects, the author's highest achievement in characterisation and helps us to understand his point of view. Jibananda is a drunkard and a rogue, absolutely devoid of all considerations of morality. A woman's chastity is for him a purchasable commodity, and if a woman is squeamish about her virtue, he consigns her to the room of the servants. What strikes us in this rapscallion is not so much his viciousness as the sense of humour with which he looks upon himself and others. He is absolutely free from hypocrisy, and the placid detachment with which he judges himself and other villains bewilders accomplices like Janardan and Shiromoni but illuminates his own character. It seems that he has a double personality; he commits crime after crime but also views his activities and his mischances from a distance. He is eager to fly away from the clutches of Mr. Kay, but when he finds that he is bound to be apprehended, contemplates with glee the prospect of the Magistrate's feeding fat an ancient grudge against him. He makes an immoral proposal to Shodashi without

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the least hesitation but, equally without a scruple, accepts poison from her hands.

The meeting with Shodashi effects in Jibananda a sudden change which, although unexpected, is quite in keeping with his temperament, and it is in this later Jibananda that we find the clue to Sarat Chandra's attitude to life. From Shodashi he learns that a woman's virtue is not a commodity but a religion. He now feels a new interest in life, not the debauchee's lustfulness but a healthy craving for self-realisation. But his comic sense is as unclouded as ever; he makes fun of Nirmal's fascination for Shodashi and Sagar's designs on his own life and views with good humour the prospect of death by heart failure. When he feels that Shodashi will not certainly live with him as his wife, he gives away the whole of his property in charity in aid of the asylum she joins as a worker, and then retires. In making this gift, he points out that he is not really an ascetic but a normal man with normal but unfulfilled aspirations. To Shodashi he says, "Do you mean to suggest that I am a *Sannyasi*? That's a lie. I can't allow anything to be wasted in my world any longer. I want to live here as a man amongst men. I want a home, I want a wife, and I want children; and on the day when death will come irresistibly, I want to depart even before the gaze of them all." This sums up, in a nutshell, Sarat Chandra's own philosophy of THE RIGHT OF THE ROAD (*Pather Dabi*).

END

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